

**The hand-painted films of Stan Brakhage: An  
interdisciplinary and phenomenological exploration of  
painted moving images**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the latter hand-painted films of American avant-garde filmmaker, Stan Brakhage. These films, produced in the last few decades of the twentieth century, have suffered from critical neglect. They have also suffered from their historical and methodological framing within the renowned American avant-garde film movement. I argue that such approaches have resulted in inaccurate and unhelpful academic appraisals of these artworks.

This thesis addresses the neglect of the hand-painted works by presenting a new methodological and epistemic approach to this collection of films, which relocates the works outside the medium of film. Based on a wide range of primary and secondary evidence, it brings together phenomenological, interdisciplinary and performative lines of enquiry, considering both the production and reception of the films. The project also offers a greater understanding of Brakhage's own experience of his hand-painted films and the artworks themselves as products. As a result, a new and creative understanding of the hand-painted works has been developed that investigates the abstract and musical possibilities of the painted images through the concepts of visual music and visual narrative.

In addition to the production process, this project also extends current scholarship on the performative process of reception, through a comprehensive study of the role of the audience. It argues for the increased relevance of reception for the hand-painted films, presenting an understanding of audience members as co-creators of meaning. This line of theoretical enquiry is evidenced through a qualitative and empirical reception study, engaging directly with audience members of a hand-painted film. A focus group, held at Southsea Sangha in October 2017, provides an original exploration of the possibilities of mindfulness and meditation as means of engaging with subjective audience experiences of reception.

## **Declaration**

Whilst registered as a candidate for the above degree, I have not been registered for any other research award. The results and conclusions embodied in this thesis are the work of the named candidate and have not been submitted for any other academic award

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## Introduction

This work aims to provide new insights into the hand-painted films of the late American filmmaker, Stan Brakhage (1933-2003). Brakhage is best known for his camera-made films released in the 1950s and 1960s, which are framed within the American avant-garde film movement. He is, however, less well-known for his hand-painted films produced in the latter decades of the twentieth century. These works moved beyond filming concrete *things* using the camera, as Brakhage redirected his art towards painted images that moved through light. These films centre around multi-coloured images, where different shapes and shades of colour flicker rapidly in diverse patterns across the screen, interspersed with significant moments of light and darkness. This thesis will explore the critical neglect of Brakhage's hand-painted films. Moreover, it will seek to address it.

Brakhage is a revered figure of the avant-garde and he has become a crucial figure in the history of alternative film, many of his early films celebrated as part of the avant-garde canon. In contrast, the painted works have been treated largely as secondary experimental works. This has led to a skewed historical impression of Brakhage's creativity, built on critical clichés of avant-garde practice. This thesis will show that the existing understanding of avant-garde film that has been assumed relevant to the hand-painted works is not applicable. Instead, a new critical approach to the hand-painted works is needed. A reconsideration of Brakhage will respond to the aesthetic essence of the hand-painted works. By moving away from existing approaches of Brakhage and his more prominent works, this thesis aims to develop a new identity for the hand-painted films outside of their current filmic understanding.

The inspiration for this thesis has come from my own personal experiences of Brakhage's hand-painted works. I have seen a range of the artist's films made throughout his career but the striking aesthetic qualities of the hand-painted films have left the greatest impression on me. I was drawn to this style of artwork for the first time around nine years ago, but initially struggled to understand why it resonated with me so strongly. Whilst I could witness and recognise the significance of the viewing for myself, it was difficult to understand and verbalise my experience of the visual artwork. The works disrupted so many of my expectations of film and I shortly found that existing critical film literature offered little insight into Brakhage's latter style. There was much literature on Brakhage and his earlier achievements in avant-garde film, but the analyses of Brakhage's hand-painted films were few and cursory. The premise for this thesis therefore evolved as a result of my interest in this under-explored

body of hand-painted films. Further research has developed my frustration with the lack of existing critical work on these artworks and the limited approaches available that consider how these works can offer meaningful viewing experiences.

### **Statement of method**

I hope that this thesis will develop the current understanding of Brakhage's hand-painted works. The work will be investigated through three key areas:

- 1) **Identification:** Exploring and challenging the existing, clichéd avant-garde approach to the works in order to identify a more relevant and useful understanding of them
- 2) **An interdisciplinary investigation:** Re-analysing the significance of existing film and avant-garde approaches in order to create a new, eclectic methodology that moves beyond specific media and standard philosophical positions between film and other visual art
- 3) **A new epistemic approach:** The limitations of existing research and academic approaches will help shape a new methodology that considers how the artworks can be experienced meaningfully

I will achieve these three critical outcomes by adopting and considering four existing research methods: the history of the American avant-garde film movement, interdisciplinary approaches to art, the philosophy of phenomenology, and the roles of production and reception.

#### *The American avant-garde film movement*

It is hard to argue against Stan Brakhage's current location within the avant-garde movement. Despite the artist himself not being a fan of such labels, Brakhage embodied the visual perspectives and modernist, romantic tendencies of the avant-garde movement strongly. In fact, in many ways, Brakhage's perspectives of film indicated the direction of the avant-garde movement itself. Brakhage's impact on independent film and film culture has been widely recorded and celebrated by other avant-garde filmmakers, academics and critics alike. His dedication to exploring the visual possibilities of the film medium (a critical aim of the avant-garde) led to him being branded "the first truly modernist American film-maker in terms of the movement's 'return to materials' war cry" (O'Pray, 2003, p. 59). His relevance and interest to the avant-garde film movement meant "[H]e was easily the most thoroughly covered



filmmaker in the pages of *Film Culture* [American art film journal]" (Peterson, 1994, p. 65). As a result, the life and development of Stan Brakhage has dominated much of this critical and academic literature, including his own innovative visual theories and perceptions.

Because of the strong relationship and historical ties between Brakhage and the avant-garde film movement, it has become standard practice to consider Brakhage's works in terms of the avant-garde. He is regularly considered a product of the avant-garde film movement, sharing the same modernist and romantic approaches to film, and holding an integral belief in the possibilities of the medium outside of the conventional, Hollywood expectations of film. In Chapter One I will trace the history of the avant-garde film movement in relation to Brakhage's earlier works and visual methodologies that resulted from the 1940s and 1950s. These sections will outline Brakhage's important creation of a new style of avant-garde film, the lyrical film. Through his romantic and poetic explorations of his own vision, Brakhage's liberation of the camera established the camera equipment's role in "becom[ing] an intuitive instrument of expression of the body and the eye" (O'Pray, 2003, p. 60). The role of the camera has been, historically, a significant part of avant-garde focus, both practically and academically. The presence of the filmmaker is felt as the author of the film behind the camera, evidencing his visual exploration of his surroundings.

As a result of their avant-garde framing, the hand-painted style has been connected to the aesthetic, style, production process and visual methodologies of Brakhage's earlier work that dictated the 1950s and 1960s. These decades are widely considered the peak of the romantic and personal approach to avant-garde film, which began to ebb in the 1970s, just as Brakhage's hand-painted style started to develop. I will use existing methodologies and approaches towards the personal style of American avant-garde film to investigate the relationship between the style associated with this era and the hand-painted works. I will recontextualise and relocate the hand-painted works by examining the elements of the American avant-garde film movement that are genuinely relevant and useful to the hand-painted works, freeing them from any clichéd associations that do not support the makeup of the artworks themselves.

#### *Interdisciplinary approaches to art*

As this thesis will show, Brakhage's hand-painted works are located within the artist's wider oeuvre, which has been located squarely within the medium of film. The materiality of the medium was an essential area of interest for Brakhage, who both celebrated and tested the

materiality of the image in many ways (see Chapter One). Brakhage, in particular, is “rightly understood as epitomising the direction of personal, visionary cinema” (Le Grice, 1977, p. 88).

In outlining my approach to avant-garde film, I have clarified that Brakhage was considered a prominent voice in developing the possibilities of the medium. But, because the artist has offered such innovative insights into the medium of film, his works have, unsurprisingly, been previously analysed through a filmic lens. In contrast, as I have acknowledged, this study will question and challenge this application of a filmic methodology to the hand-painted works. As a result, I will draw attention to critical issues with their current location and important gaps in existing research that restrict understanding and discussion of these works. I will suggest that new, relevant approaches to these gaps can be provided by investigating examples of artwork from other art disciplines. These interdisciplinary connections will include the relationship between film and paint, which is of clear interest to the style of artwork, evidenced even in the title of the hand-painted style. This interdisciplinary relationship has received a significant lack of in-depth critical interest and analysis in terms of the films themselves or the style.

This thesis will argue that Brakhage’s hand-painted works have not received sufficient attention under existing film approaches. Instead, the hand-painted works have been restricted by the parameters of the medium, which have not provided the most appropriate method of study. My thesis will challenge the current epistemic approach within film theory and demonstrate the need for an interdisciplinary approach. This will draw greater attention to the inter-medial qualities of the works to evidence the shortfalls of their current filmic location and to identify crucial new approaches to overcome these existing problems.

### *Phenomenology*

In drawing attention to the hand-painted works, this study is particularly interested in how the works can be considered significant within the arts. As a result, a key priority of this thesis is to explore how the works can be experienced meaningfully. The field of phenomenology is therefore highly important in considering the abstract fields of experience, thought and consciousness in my attempt to demystify the process of coming into contact with a hand-painted work. Considered a practical approach to *doing* philosophy, “a *practice* rather than a system” (Moran, 2000, p. 4), phenomenology is concerned with exploring the phenomena of experience as manifested through the structures of consciousness. It investigates a highly

personal and subjective process linked inseparably to the ways in which experience is continuously lived, received and stored. As a result, phenomenology offers methods of approaching “not only perception, but thought, feeling and action as well” (Moriston, 1979, p. 562).

This study will principally adopt the phenomenological theories of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, which emphasise the significance of the direct, physical environment. In comparison to other approaches to phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty argues that individual consciousness is indistinguishable from the direct experience of the world around us; we cannot separate our experience from this setting as it is an embedded part of our understanding of living and experiencing. He highlighted that “[W]e never cease living in the world of perception, but we go beyond it in critical thought- almost to the point of forgetting the contribution of perception to our idea of truth” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 3). This can also be applied to the experience of coming into contact with art. Merleau-Ponty’s ideas complement the interdisciplinary approach outlined above, drawing attention back to the direct, most appropriate elements of focus within the hand-painted works, and the experience of them, during the live moment of viewing the film. Thus, analysis is crucial in re-directing attention back to the primacy of the art experience itself in order to escape from traditional or expected approaches to the works that have been, over time, automatically assumed to be significant. This method will help my study to develop on Merleau-Ponty’s own war cry “to return to the world of actual experience” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 66).

### *Production and reception*

A phenomenological exploration of the hand-painted works requires an understanding of the different ways in which people come into contact with, and thus experience, the artworks. A critical distinction can be made between those that experience (or are involved in) the production of the works and those that experience the films as part of the reception. As an independent, lone artist (see Chapter Two), Brakhage is the key focus of the production of the works. The experiences that resulted in the creation of the hand-painted artworks, as well as the creative production experience itself, are of great interest to this study. Considering these processes offers valuable insights into Brakhage’s phenomenological reasons for the creation of this alternative aesthetic within his oeuvre.

Alternatively, outside of Brakhage’s production experience, any other phenomenological contact with the hand-painted works can be considered in light of reception. The experience

of viewing the artworks offers a critical area of study for this thesis: how audiences meaningfully experience the hand-painted works. Exploring this reception experience is of particular interest in examining the expectations and limitations of an avant-garde approach to reception. This thesis will investigate the ability of an avant-garde film understanding of reception to offer a helpful method by which to approach the hand-painted works. This approach includes both the practical act of reception (as audience member) and an analytical approach (academic and/or critic). It will also examine interdisciplinary possibilities as alternative methods to frame and consider the phenomenology of reception.

## Literature Review

There is a vast amount of literature available on the life and works of Stan Brakhage. His impact on the American avant-garde film culture has been widely recorded and celebrated by many avant-garde filmmakers, academics and critics. Notably, Brakhage has been recognised as “one of our most articulate aestheticians” (Peters, 2003, p. 10) and “a poet of his medium” (Brenez, Martin, 2003). He has been acknowledged as a filmmaker who “dominates the history of the radical film” (Sitney, 1979, p. 137) through his role as a “leading advocate for ‘personal’ filmmaking” (Camper, 2002, p. 9), the impact of which demonstrated films’ “most radical break with the aims and aspirations of commercial cinema” (Le Grice, 1977, p. 88). These impressive accolades demonstrate Brakhage’s important status to the film movement. Both he and his works received an intensive focus from key contemporary avant-garde critics and academics, including P. Adams Sitney, Fred Camper, Jonas Mekas, Phil Solomon, William C Wees, David James, Michael O’Pray and James Peterson, to name a very small few. Many of these critics knew him well and also played crucial roles in the tight-knitted culture of the avant-garde community. They published multiple books, articles and interviews between them which brought impressive depth and breadth to the literature on Brakhage. This scholarship is also supported by Brakhage’s own writings and interviews. Many of his remarks have become staple quotes, summarising the perceptions and methodologies of the filmmaker, and quoted across film sources. A particularly strong example can be found in his essay, *Metaphors on Vision* (1963):

Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure in perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of ‘Green’? (p. 30)

An examination of the existing literature demonstrates significant interest in Brakhage's earlier works and developments, particularly across the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. This attention focused on his earlier visual methodologies which experimented with new ways of exploring personal vision. This has been documented significantly in academic literature through the notion of the 'lyrical film'. This particular style of filmmaking was celebrated as a significant development by Brakhage and was, consequently, heavily adopted in avant-garde film between the 1950s and 1970s. As David E. James highlighted, this was recognised as "fundamentally an individual achievement, unlike previous developments in the avant-garde, which had been collective" (2005, p. 10). Sitney's understanding of the lyrical film, within his seminal book, *Visionary Film* (1979), is arguably the most defined and established definition. In Sitney's words:

The lyrical film postulates the film-maker behind the camera as the first-person protagonist of the film. The images of the film are what he sees, filmed in such a way that we never forget his presence and we know how he is reacting to his vision. In the lyrical form there is no longer a hero; instead, the screen is filled with movement, and that movement, both of the camera and editing, reverberates with the idea of a man looking. As viewers we see this man's intense experience of seeing. (1979, p. 142).

The lyrical film highlighted the relevance of a particular piece of film equipment: the camera. Brakhage's filmmaking methods increased the role and significance of the camera within the production process. Malcolm Le Grice felt Brakhage "concentrate[d] the major expressive means in the camera action itself: it is not simply a matter of using a hand-held camera; it is a more thorough realisation that the camera is not a neutral observer of action, but an active participant" (1977, p. 88). Nicky Hamlyn drew attention to Brakhage's camera as "never quiescent, but always twitching, hovering, circling around its subject. It is this restlessness that reminds us constantly of the presence behind the eyepiece" (2003, p. 90). O'Pray also connected the camera to Brakhage's physical body; "Brakhage's art is a celebration of an intense subjectivity in which the camera became an intuitive instrument of expression of the body and the eye" (2003, p. 60).

This earlier celebration of Brakhage's lyrical and personal approach to film through the camera contrasts significantly with his later hand-painted style of work. Born out of a different era within the avant-garde film movement, painting on film is generally understood as a later development within the filmmaker's oeuvre. A more definitive location within the latter half of the twentieth century is difficult to depict, with different decades offered in different academic sources. For P. Adams Sitney, the hand-painted style "did not assume a dominant place in [Brakhage's] filmography until the 1980s" (P. Adams Sitney, 2008, p. 76),

a sentiment supported also by the authors of *Visual Music* (2005, p. 250). For David James, the hand-painted works were best located in “the late 1980s and 1990s” (2005, p. 15) whilst Fred Camper identified Brakhage’s turn “mostly to hand-painted films in the last decade” (2001, p. 78). Following the filmmaker’s death, J. Hoberman simply explained that “[T]oward the end of his life, Brakhage’s work turned more abstract [...] as he began painting directly on film” (2003), emphasising the artist’s movement away from representational imagery. Other academics have tracked this development of style across Brakhage’s oeuvre, without specifically locating the hand-painted method in the twentieth century. David James reminded readers that the hand-painted style “return[ed] to a process he had begun with *Dog Star Man*” (2005, p. 6), reminding his readers of the inclusion of hand-painted techniques and scratches in his earlier camera works. Similarly, Sitney depicted Brakhage’s use of “the camera less and less, preferring to paint on film, but without reference to his own life or his thought process or that of others” (2008, p. 75).

There has, therefore, been an overall acknowledgement of the hand-painted style of filmmaking in the later decades of Brakhage’s life, regardless of some inconsistencies and uncertainties. However, not all literature on Brakhage recognises the hand-painted films within this later stage of the artist’s oeuvre. Many academics instead focus on Brakhage’s new visual methodologies with little or no reference to its practical representation through hand-painted images. James Peterson’s book, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order* (1994) offers impressive critical attention to Brakhage but no reference at all to the hand-painted style. Bruce Elder wrote in *Body of Vision* (1998) that:

The conception of cinema that he offered from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, that cinema can present what he calls ‘moving visual thinking,’ he also bases on a notion of the body, for this idea of cinema proposes that film’s great strength is that it alone among art media can present the prime matter of thought before it passes through the filter of language (p. 312).

Elder later confirms that “Brakhage’s cinema is justly renowned for his use of the hand-held camera” (1998, p. 315). This is correct but emphasises the absence of interest in his non-camera related, hand-painted films. The book, *Visual Music Artists* (2010), also defines this era without mention of the hand-painted works. Instead the work connects this new visual methodology to Brakhage’s more conventional camera approach to film: “he continued his visual explorations of landscape and the nature of light and thought process, and through the late 70s and early 80s produced filmic equivalents of what he termed ‘moving visual thinking’ in several series of photographic abstractions known as the Roman, Arabic and the Egyptian series” (p. 93). Marty Cohen offered a compromise of sorts when he wrote, “In his more recent work he emphasises hypnagogic and closed-eye vision, presenting the kind of

flashing lights and patterns seen in a trance or with one's eyes closed. Brakhage likes to call these usually hand-painted images a "corollary for experience" (1997). These quotes reflect a significant pattern across Brakhage literature that pays little or no attention to the hand-painted style or hand-painted works. This conclusion was also reached by PhD student John Powers. In his abstract for a presentation given at The Brakhage Centre, University of Colorado (2013), he explored "an overlooked period of Stan Brakhage's later career, his hand-painted films of the 1980s and 1990s". The potential reasons behind this absence of attention to the hand-painted films in Chapter One.

However, there are existing examples of scholarship that do highlight Brakhage's hand-painted style. Many of these are brief but descriptive in nature, drawing attention to the "indescribably rich outpouring of hand-painted film" ('Stan Brakhage: Micro-Gardens and Love Songs SB-2002'); as "forays into visual ontology" (Sitney, 2008, p. 255), or as artworks where "vibrant forms flicker rhythmically" (Broughter, Strick, Wiseman & Zilczer., 2005, p. 250). Many academics have highlighted Brakhage's impressive painterly qualities ((Elder, 1998), (MacDonald, 2003, p. 3), (M.S Mason, 1989/90), and (Mason, 1992), to name a few). Specific accolades have been made to Brakhage's skill at painting which, for example, placed him "at the summit of hand painting on film [...] he is one of the most significant painters of our age" ('Stan Brakhage: Micro-Gardens and Love Songs SB-2002'). Fred Camper offered an insightful aesthetic description of the hand-painted style when describing *Elementary Phrases* (1994) in *The Chicago Reader* (1994). He described "[A] swirl of red and blue congeals for an instant into a forest of blue trees, globules of paint [which] ooze like lava' tiny multi-coloured spots on a black field suggests planets, comets, and stars" (Camper, 1999, 'Elementary Phrases'). This draws attention to the materiality of the paint and the abstract possibilities of the artworks (see Chapter Three).

Another critical source on the hand-painted works is Brakhage himself. Offering personal expressions and perceptions on the works, the artist's own descriptions and definitions offer helpful insights into the production process. He himself emphasised the significant role of painting when he explained, "For myself I'm most excited about painting on film because there's no way one can paint from frame to frame so perfectly that there isn't that vibrancy of the actual thing, that it's running" (Weinbren, 2007, p. 123). Brakhage also indicated the relevance of paint in relation to film. In an interview, he stated, "I think painting is [...] I'm all speechless as to what to say about it, just everything seems opening, opening infinitely, in ways that other areas of film seem more and more preclusive" (Still [Producer], 1996,

*Brakhage on Brakhage 2*). Brakhage also confirmed the connection between hand-painting and his new visual methodologies, as well as to other painters. He “began painting on film to try to give some representation to hypnagogic vision, which had been so rich as a child and I’d very nearly forgotten across the teens and then was retrieved through the inspiration of many of these great painters” (Weinbren, 2007, p. 138).

### **A new exploration into Brakhage’s painted works**

The literature explored above helps situate Brakhage’s hand-painted style within the artist’s much larger and varied oeuvre, locating it via a strong biographical framing of the artist and his life. As I have mentioned, the strength of the existing literature is greatly aided by the sheer number of quotes directly available from the filmmaker himself that cover his life, experiences, art style and visual methodologies. As Brakhage died in 2003, this primary information from the artist is of great value. This is supported by the existence of the Brakhage Archives at The Brakhage Centre, University of Colorado. This extensive collection holds a range of insightful literature and resources that span across the filmmaker’s life. I was fortunate enough to visit the Centre in 2014 and this thesis includes many useful sources from these archives.

The existing literature provides some key areas of focus for the hand-painted works, including Brakhage’s moving visual thinking methodology, unique to his previous, camera-related methodologies. However, it also highlights the significant gap in literature surrounding the hand-painted films. The hand-painted style itself has received scant emphasis or discussion in relation to the considerable body of academic work on Brakhage’s camera styles and works (as John Powers suggested). Whilst interdisciplinary connections have been made, for example to the medium of painting, the hand-painted style has received little specialised analysis that would locate it outside of avant-garde analysis. Instead, the lack of specific attention to the hand-painted style has encouraged this style of film to be considered simultaneously alongside the camera-works as part of an underlying style and approach to film. As a result, the hand-painted works have remained an under-explored and overlooked element of both Brakhage’s oeuvre and the American avant-garde film movement.

It is therefore unsurprising that another crucial gap in existing literature is the identity of the hand-painted films themselves. As there has been less attention paid to this type of film within Brakhage’s oeuvre, it is unclear which of Brakhage’s 300-400 films can be understood



as hand-painted. Some of the existing literature identifies a few examples of films that are hand-painted. For example, the book, *Visual Music*, (Brougher, Strick, Wiseman, Zilczer, 2005, p. 250) identifies *Night Music* (1986) and *The Dante Quartet*<sup>1</sup> (1987) as hand-painted artworks. However, there is no definitive list to clarify which of Brakhage's works fall into this area. This is clearly problematic in developing awareness and understanding of the hand-painted films and the ways in which they differ from the earlier camera films.

A crucial aim of this study is to increase the understanding and depth of knowledge surrounding the hand-painted works, building a much-needed bespoke and extensive approach that defines the key attributes and, therefore, the nature of this style of artwork. This will occur, to an extent, in isolation from the filmmaker's earlier styles of filming and, at times, it may even directly challenge the contrast between this earlier stage of art. This is highly important in investigating whether the hand-painted works share many genuine similarities to the earlier, camera-made works in order to develop a methodology that advocates the nature and aesthetics of the hand-painted body of works.

Therefore, identifying the works that belong to the hand-painted style is a significant part of this study. Providing a definitive list of hand-painted works is necessary in order to establish the wider identity of this group of works (see Chapter One and Appendix One: *List of Stan Brakhage's hand-painted films*). This will be achieved by exploring the shared themes and elements of the works that result specifically from the hand-painted images. However, it is important to acknowledge that this study will have limited scope to increase understanding and analysis of the hand-painted works on an individual basis. Whilst I will refer to many of the hand-painted works throughout to evidence my arguments, this thesis is most interested in answering the critical problems that continue to prevent such individual analysis to take place on a larger scale. Such analysis is currently lacking because of the absence of underpinning discussion on wider themes, which has exacerbated the difficulties in discussing films that defy verbal language. Significant analysis of an individual film basis would be of limited value until a wider understanding has been developed, alongside broader methods of analysis.

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<sup>1</sup>Despite this reference, not all of the films that make up *The Dante Quartet* are purely hand-painted, as we shall see in Chapter One. This evidences the lack of knowledge of this body of works.

## An Overview

I will use the methodologies outlined to explore the make-up of the hand-painted works in relation to their phenomenological and interdisciplinary possibilities and connections. I will challenge their existing filmic location and expectations in order to ensure my new approach to the hand-painted films responds to the unique needs and nature of the hand-painted style. This exploration will be considered across both the production and reception of the hand-painted works, in order to explore the ways in which different parties meaningfully relate to, and experience, the artworks.

In order to achieve this focus on both production and reception, this thesis is divided into two main sections. The Production section of this thesis comprises the first three chapters. These focus on different aspects of the creation of the hand-painted works, concentrating on Stan Brakhage's own experience in connection with the films. *Chapter One, 'Introducing the Second Stage'*, will provide an in-depth exploration into the historical context of the hand-painted works within Brakhage's overall oeuvre. Through a biographical analysis of the artist's career, I hope to extend the existing knowledge of both the hand-painted films and the earlier camera-stage of filmmaking, to develop understanding of how these two methods and approaches co-exist within the wider filmography. I will consider the possible reasons for the artist's shift into this new aesthetic practice and consider in greater detail the makeup and essence of the hand-painted style. I will also aim to fill the significant gap in existing literature by offering an extensive list of Brakhage's artworks that belong to the hand-painted category.

*Chapter Two, 'The Filmmaker's Experience'*, will explore Brakhage's production method in creating the hand-painted films. It will analyse the role of the artist throughout the creative method in order to understand Brakhage's phenomenological process, including the inspiration behind the works as well as the more practical methods of creating the films. This chapter will seek to uncover the different stages of experience that can be traced throughout the creative process and the impact they had on the meaning of the hand-painted images. Chapter Two will also examine the significance of Brakhage as an auteur. I will investigate the surprising lack of auteur discussion on avant-garde film and explore the artist's multi-faceted status as filmmaker, author and academic to analyse the level of significance that Brakhage as author has over the meaning of the works.

*Chapter Three, 'The product or the process? A consideration of representation and abstraction',* will investigate the notions of representation and abstraction in art in order to confirm the approach to communication within the hand-painted works. It will consider existing approaches across avant-garde film, as well as arguments made in relation to Brakhage and the hand-painted works, in order to confirm my own location of the body of works in connection to both representation and abstraction. In connection to abstraction, I will explore abstract possibilities across the medium of painting, particularly in relation to the Abstract Expressionist movement in the twentieth century. Finally, this chapter will consider communication in relation to narrative, investigating both the literary and visual possibilities communicated through the films as art products.

Chapters Four, Five and Six will move away from Brakhage's production experience of the hand-painted works and instead explore the experience of audiences through Reception. This section will attempt to substantially increase the awareness of, and scholarship about, the role of the audience directly in relation to the hand-painted artworks. I will evaluate the relevance of the existing filmic location of the hand-painted works at this point and develop a new epistemic approach in relation to my findings and other interdisciplinary relationships significant to the act of reception. *Chapter Four, The Interdisciplinary Product: Developing the Visual Narrative',* will extend the visual possibilities of the hand-painted films in connection to reception. I will compare the original reception settings of the hand-painted films to modern-day viewing conditions in order to reconsider the experience available for audiences. I will explore the interdisciplinary parameters of the hand-painted works and other art media in a consideration of the films as art products. I also aim to offer a new definition and approach to interdisciplinary understandings of art, in order to relocate the works from their current filmic setting.

In *Chapter Five, 'The Interdisciplinary Process: A performative, co-creative and live reception',* I will turn my personal notion of interdisciplinarity for the hand-painted films towards the process of reception. I aim to extend the visual narrative in relation to the roles and experiences of potential audience members. I will do this through an exploration of the interdisciplinary possibilities of performance art, particularly within the productive decade of the 1970s, with connection to John Cage, fluxus and happenings. I will examine the participative and performative considerations in performance scholarship to offer a new performative approach to reception for Brakhage's works.

*Chapter Six, 'Re-approaching Stan Brakhage: A new qualitative and empirical method of reception', will apply this new performative approach to reception to a real audience of a hand-painted film. This chapter will be concerned with the design and implementation of a qualitative reception study of the hand-painted works in order to offer new, primary evidence concerning the reception experiences of audience members. This chapter is divided into two sections: 'Part One: Designing an empirical method of reception for the hand-painted works' will explore existing approaches to empirical reception methods of study in order to design an approach that best fits the requirements of the hand-painted works. It will consider the practical, reflective skills required by audience members when reflecting on their reception experiences of a hand-painted work and will introduce the field of mindfulness and meditation as a potential methodological approach towards participative and meaningful audience reception. 'Part Two: A qualitative focus group into the hand-painted works at Southsea Sangha' will explore the chosen methodology and practical examination of reception with a live audience of one of Brakhage's hand-painted works.*

By the end of this thesis, I hope to have extensively built on the current, limited academia on Brakhage's hand-painted works, bringing together original strands of research to offer a new and comprehensive approach to this body of works. My conclusions will aim to demonstrate the impact of these strands in tackling the wider problems and the gaps in literature for the hand-painted films. I will also consider the wider findings of this study and their possible implications for art appreciation.

# Production

## **Chapter One: Introducing the Second Stage Collection**

Brakhage's complete oeuvre is diverse and complex, spanning a fifty-year period. He experienced great success but also poverty and financial despair throughout his long career in filmmaking. Despite the large amount of literature available on his life, family and career, there are many inconsistencies as a result of the personal nature of his works. His changing views and contradictory perspectives, on both filmmaking and his films, are often apparent. Even the total number of his films can be disputed, commonly identified as anywhere between 200 and 400, depending on how his many series and collections are categorised. There are, therefore, certainly ambiguities surrounding aspects of Brakhage's oeuvre. The central crux of this study focuses on one such ambiguity, the significant lack of critical attention that his hand-painted works have received. This is particularly apparent when considering the substantial critical acclaim Brakhage received for his camera-made methods of filmmaking within the avant-garde. These works, I will argue, make up the larger and more dominant area of his oeuvre.

This chapter will explore the reasons behind the absence of critical interest and scholarship in Brakhage's hand-painted works. In order to do this, it will consider the historical context surrounding the hand-painted films, both in relation to the filmmaker himself and the wider film culture at the time. This chapter will also offer a much-needed description and examination of Brakhage's hand-painted works, including, for the first time, a list of films that fall into the hand-painted category.

### **Contextualising the hand-painted works: Brakhage and the avant-garde film movement**

As mentioned, this thesis centres on the absence of critical discussion of Brakhage's hand-painted films. This absence of attention would suggest the works have received a disappointing reception from filmmakers, critics and academics alike. However, Brakhage himself was a prominent character in the independent film movement of the twentieth century, receiving much critical attention. The answer to this contradiction can be found in the consideration of Brakhage's full career as a filmmaker. This includes an examination of the life and oeuvre of Brakhage, which the hand-painted films can be understood to play a significant but smaller part.

It is impossible to investigate Brakhage's career without considering the wider American avant-garde film movement<sup>2</sup>. The avant-garde was a crucial film movement that transformed independent film in the twentieth century. Brakhage's status and legacy in independent film is inextricably tied to the American avant-garde film movement because of the shared aspirations both had for film. As is widely known, avant-garde film is loosely understood as an alternative approach to commercial, Hollywood film. Instead, it aimed to draw attention to "the medium and its properties and materials, and in the process create[s] its own history separate from that of the classical narrative cinema" (*A History of the American*, 1976, p. 21). In doing so, it demonstrated "the need, the desire, to apprehend the world in a personal way through the lens of a movie camera, and then to share this very personal vision with others" (Valera, 2005, p. 6). However, describing the avant-garde in more detail is complex: it was a diverse movement, generally considered only through the twentieth century. It has been defined using differing terms and identities, including underground, independent and art-film, and the New American Cinema, to name but a few. Part of the complexity of summarising the avant-garde comes with the problematic implications of determining shared values and approaches across films and filmmakers. As James Peterson explains, "although the term 'avant-garde' may be the product of a reasonable compromise, using it always risks misdescribing this cinema's history, which is sometimes better understood as a shared idiom of film language, or even as a craft passed from one generation of artists to the next" (1994, p. 186). Peterson's notion of generational changes within the avant-garde acknowledges the different approaches to film across the movement. These approaches are integral to the largely modernist identity of the avant-garde, which are categorised by periods of change throughout the century. Such change came about as a direct result of differing trends and fashions within the movement. These changing trends directly impacted the reception of the hand-painted works. It ensured the avant-garde experienced periods of particular progression but also of decline for certain styles of film, and therefore particular filmmakers linked to that style of film. I will demonstrate in this chapter that Brakhage's hand-painted works were impacted by such a decline.

Brakhage's significance to avant-garde film is commonly linked to an early trend of the movement's filmmaking located in the 1950s. This was not for his hand-painted works, which would appear in his oeuvre decades later, but for his camera-made works. Brakhage's avant-garde of the 1950s was born out of prior fashions within the movement. Exactly how these

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<sup>2</sup>In this thesis, reference to the 'avant-garde' will relate to the American avant-garde film movement, unless stated otherwise.

fashions are defined varies and different historical divisions have been offered. Some, such as Peterson's *Dreams of Chaos* (1994) don't start until the 1950s, but most, such as Sitney's prolific *Visionary Film* (1979) emphasise the impact of the 1940s.

The 1940s became influential within the avant-garde for the post-war film culture that dramatically increased attention to art in America at this time. It marked a particular change for American art culture, which had previously looked to Europe for the latest art trends. As David James explains, "before the forties no tradition of filmmaking in the United States existed to provide an independent filmmaker who understood his or her works as Art- as an end sufficient to itself rather than as a means of entry into the studio industry" (1989, p. 32). Therefore, the 1940s could be considered the decade that set the avant-garde in motion, establishing a strong, alternative approach to film as art. The significant momentum in independent film at this time was pivotal to the movement's development. Much of the critical attention in the 1940s revolved around filmmaker Maya Deren, who "became the emblematic figure of the American avant-garde" (Thompson & Bordwell, 2003, p. 490). Deren is given much acclaim for her role in establishing avant-garde film, James goes so far as to credit her with "invent[ing] the avant-garde film for Americans as both genre and mode of production" (1989, p. 314). Her most known film, *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) was described by Brakhage as dealing "with devastating psychological and personal problems through film [and the influence of this approach] was such that a unique film art evolved" (1989, p. 93). Her hand-held shots and personal presence within her own film images became celebrated avant-garde traits that would continue to be used across the next few decades.

Significantly, Deren's work championed the role of the camera within film at this time, which enabled her to make "the first narrative film in the history of the American avant-garde, which up to that point had been dominated by abstract representations and formal experiments with animation" (Geller, 2006, p. 140). The developed role of the camera is a critical area of study throughout this thesis because of the long-term implications and expectations it created within the medium of film. The camera became perhaps *the* central instrument of independent film and, in doing so, epitomised a move away from abstract and, largely, non-camera animations that had come before. Film scholarship would later consider the treatment of the camera, its position, settings and the edited sequencing of camera images as key areas of focus within the medium. From Deren in the 1940s, the camera matured into a major element of film production, analysis and theory. The relevance of the camera in avant-garde film did not wane throughout the twentieth century. This creates a



critical contradiction within Brakhage's oeuvre: for Brakhage's later hand-painted works, the camera was not used at all as part of the filmmaking process. Brakhage's choice to discard the camera in the hand-painted films was a significant step away from this vital area of focus in avant-garde film. As a result, Deren's earlier developments with the camera are critical to avant-garde history, paving a way that would benefit and impact the avant-garde for decades to come and would, much later, make Brakhage's hand-painted films seem irrelevant.

#### *Brakhage and the 1950s- The Lyrical Film*

Yet, without Deren drawing attention to the personal filmic possibilities through the camera in the 1940s, Brakhage's earlier camera-made, lyrical film success would likely not have taken place. The 1950s was a critical decade for Stan Brakhage, it marked the start of his prolific film career and began a prosperous period of filmmaking that the artist would historically be defined and remembered for. Brakhage's relevance to this era has been widely recorded. Sitney writes, "The 1950s were quiet years within the American avant-garde cinema... Thus the figure of Stan Brakhage [...], dominate[d] the history of the radical film during that time" (1979, p. 137). Many others tie Brakhage's significance at this time to the new style of film he created, which "with its new ideas of vision [offered] a mother lode of expanded techniques and fresh approaches" (Renan, 1971, p. 118). This style of film was the *lyrical film*, the inspiration and creation of which Brakhage has consistently been credited with. Similar to Deren's influence, the lyrical film had far-reaching implications on the avant-garde landscape at the time. Its effects would be strongly felt in the movement over the next fifteen years. The central premise of the lyrical film was the presence of the filmmaker throughout the visuals- not in front of the camera, but behind it, a new personal approach to filmmaking. The film gave a sense of the filmmaker's personal vision, not as dramatic character but as person and as a filmmaker. For this reason, Sheldon Renan credits Brakhage in *The Underground Film* (1971) as "the major transitional figure in the turning away of 'experimental' films from literature and surrealist psychodrama and in its subsequent move toward the more purely personal and visual" (p. 118). To Brakhage, the move away from drama was evident through his documentary tendencies. He claimed to be "the most thorough documentary film maker in the world because I document the act of seeing as well as everything the light brings me" (in Wees, 1992, p. 78). It is this documentary vision that moved the avant-garde away from classical narrative and the previous era of the psychodrama. Brakhage made a conscious decision to abandon drama, fictional characters and settings in order to instead depict his own experience of moving through the world. In

this way, the lyrical film reflected the phenomenological implications of the artist's works, through their link to Brakhage's lived experience (see Chapter Two).

It was through the camera that Brakhage's lyrical film progressed Deren's avant-garde of the 1940s<sup>3</sup>, demonstrating a subtle shift in avant-garde film fashion. John Pruitt recognised this change as "ultimately [a rejection of] Deren's insistence that filmmaking must begin with a respect for the conventional means of the photographic image" (Chicago Review, 2001, p. 119). The camera played a critical role in Brakhage's development of this romantic and phenomenological approach to film. The camera equipment became an extension of the filmmaker on multiple levels; the movement of the camera reflected the embodied physical movements of the filmmaker himself, who trained himself to hold the camera in a way that best reflected his own physicality and vision. In Brakhage's words, the lyrical film:

powerfully includes the emotions of the maker, as *literal motion*. So that if I'm all a tremble, that tremble is being transferred along the line of my arms to the camera, to the film itself, that's recording. If I stumble, that stumble is a set of tumbling rhythms within the frame that's being recorded as I breathe (Luna, 1998, p. 39).

Brakhage's embodiment with the camera was produced by liberating the camera from the tripod, an expressive mode that dominated many of his films. Whilst this emphasised the movement of Brakhage's body, it was the role of the eyes, the focal point for perception, which Brakhage prioritised above all. The camera movement depicted and re-presented the movement of the eyes, "catching and releasing one point of interest after another, the camera moves as the eyes do when they dart from detail to detail of an unfamiliar scene" (Wees, 1992, p. 86). This returns to the documentary perspective of Brakhage's works, drawing attention to real-life practices and traits that lie at the heart of both perception and experience.

Because of this focus on personal experience, Brakhage's works became increasingly centred on his life and that of his family, reflecting a 'home movie' approach to avant-garde filmmaking. The result of this was, as Renan explains, "a rippling reality in which the photographic raw material of the film-maker's actual life is repeatedly transformed and reseen in a continual turbulence of movement, of colour, of light" (1971, p. 118). Whilst varied in content and focus, his photographic films encompassed a range of recurring themes that are central to Brakhage's perceptions and visual methodologies at this time, including

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<sup>3</sup>Maya Deren did not see this change as a positive progression, she felt that "Brakhage's radical subjectivity had forced his filmmaking out of the domain of film altogether and into that of painting, specifically Abstract Expressionism" (Chicago Review, 2001, p. 122).

childhood, nature and death. Some film examples include *Window Water Baby Moving* (1959), which documented the birth of his first child, Myrrena; *Wedlock House: An Intercourse* (1959), the visual result of an argument between Brakhage and his first wife, Jane; *Anticipation of the Night* (1958), a personal visual exploration of one man's experience of night (also widely considered the first lyrical film), and *Sirius Re-membered* (1959), which documented the decomposing corpse of the family dog.

For this thesis on the hand-painted films, Brakhage's lyrical mode of filmmaking in the 1950s is of substantial interest because of the impact it would have on the later hand-painted style of film. Essentially, Brakhage's renowned status in the 1950s, which followed through to the 1960s, not only impacted the expectations of Brakhage's own work but had a significant influence on the avant-garde movement as a whole. Developing key avant-garde strands from the 1940s, Brakhage helped to establish and confirm the lyrical, romantic and personal capabilities of the camera in avant-garde film, impacting the shape of the film movement throughout these decades. His works and new style of film inspired and encouraged a multitude of lyrical films from other artists. The development of the lyrical film helped cement a critical and academic approach to filmmaking that drew on the photographic images created by the camera. This therefore impacted the wider avant-garde culture through to the mid-1960s, but it had a hugely important impact on Brakhage's career. Brakhage continued to make films up until his death in 2003. He produced many important works that are considered vital contributions to the avant-garde canon, such as the *Dog Star Man* series (1961-1964), *The Art of Vision* (1964), *23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm Branch* (1966) and *Text of Light* (1974). He was still a highly relevant member of the avant-garde film community but, by the late 1970s, his role had significantly changed, as the avant-garde movement changed and gravitated towards a post-modernist perspective. His previous identity (formed from the 1950s and the creation of the lyrical film) overshadowed the later stages of his filmmaking advancements because of the high esteem which his earlier filmic advancements had earned. This esteem was in direct contrast to his later works, which no longer followed the progression of the avant-garde. Instead they demonstrated regression in relation to the wider film movement. All of this would mean Brakhage's hand-painted films were produced in a very different climate from his camera works of the 1950s and 1960s and their reception changed accordingly.

### **Stan Brakhage's oeuvre: The first and second stage**

At this point, I would like to pause this historical examination of the avant-garde to both confirm and clarify the relationship between the camera and hand-painted films within Brakhage's oeuvre. So far, I have focused purely on the earlier, camera-made films of Brakhage, which I have argued fall under an earlier phase or trend of avant-garde film, from the 1940s to the mid-1960s. I have offered a brief indication of the role of the camera throughout this successful stage of independent film in America, which Brakhage himself significantly contributed to. I have also already suggested that the hand-painted films are not part of this earlier, historical setting of avant-garde film history. As such, a key next step in drawing attention to the hand-painted style is officially recognising this style as a different element of Brakhage's oeuvre, separating the hand-painted works from the earlier style of filmmaking. This will also help develop a bespoke identity for the hand-painted works.

Other academics have already attempted similar clarifications when approaching Brakhage's large oeuvre. Whilst this includes a limited pool of authors, a number of different suggestions have been offered. Sitney, in *Visual Film*, traces the key trends of avant-garde film in the twentieth century. Brakhage features heavily in many of these, including the psychodrama, the lyrical and the mythopoeia. Fred Camper's extensive bibliography on Brakhage illuminates many different areas of study, but in his article, *Brakhage's Contradictions* (2001) he divides the full oeuvre into two categories. This includes the 'main line' films, which "evidence a quest which [...] has an 'isolating and abstracting' tendency", and the 'applied films which use a pre-determined style to create an individual subject' (2001, p. 69/70). However, a similar element in all available categorisations is the absence of the hand-painted film as an acknowledged area or significant style in itself. Most do not discuss a hand-painted film or do so in insufficient detail. These existing categorisations are therefore not helpful for this study. I am, instead, offering a new method of identification specifically for this thesis that confirms and demonstrates the hand-painted works as an important entity within Brakhage's oeuvre. This is significant because it argues, for the first time, that Brakhage's hand-painted style is important and substantial enough (as a style and method) to deserve its own recognition independently, but also as part of, Brakhage's overall filmography.

My alternative method centres on the divisive and contrasting nature between the camera and hand-painted works, in relation to production methods, and therefore offers two distinctive stages. Due to its historical context, and the significance of this context, which I have argued, Brakhage's camera works are encompassed within the broad label of the *first*

*stage*. The chronological suggestion of this name derives from the historical location of the camera-works as Brakhage's first form of film. The term is purposefully ambiguous for the substantial quantity and styles of film that it encompasses, a core part of Brakhage's overall oeuvre. For my study, this ambiguity is not problematic because of the sheer amount of literature that already exists surrounding this first stage of Brakhage's career. The extensive focus on Brakhage's camera films has already produced insightful and detailed analyses on the different styles, trends and films within the camera-made, first stage. This study does not intend to build on the useful body of literature that already exists on this area of Brakhage's oeuvre, nor, I would argue, does it need to. Instead, the classification of the first-stage is of most use for this study as a means of comparison, clarifying the ways in which the hand-painted works can be set apart from within Brakhage's wider filmography. This is to help achieve my overall aim of building the attention and knowledge surrounding this new collection (and identity) of hand-painted films. These hand-painted works are therefore known as the *second stage* works, made without the use of a camera and instead painted using paint and similar materials (see Chapter Two). Once again, the chronological nature of the term is significant, asserting that this body of works is of equal relevance to the more well-known camera-made works. Currently, very little is known about this second stage collection of works, including when the purely hand-painted style arrived in Brakhage's oeuvre, simply because it has not previously been recognised as a collection in its own right. This is a key area of originality of this study that will not only identify these works (within this chapter) but extensively explore and develop methods of critical analysis for these films (across this thesis). These two terms, the first and second stage, will be used throughout this thesis, and will be used with regard to the hand-painted works to identify the unified and cohesive body of works that are made through, and reflect, Brakhage's hand-painted style of filmmaking.

These two stages suggest a clear-cut approach to Brakhage's full oeuvre. As noted above, this is not as simplistic as it sounds. Within the first stage films, there are a number of different styles and approaches to film. Before the creation of the lyrical film, Brakhage did experiment in the psychodrama, also known as the trance film, which closer resembled Deren's psychological narratives, among other styles. However, I have argued that the distinction between styles encompassed within the first stage has already been explored in great detail. Additionally, the first stage works did not simply stop in the mid-1960s, as its chronological title might suggest. Brakhage continued to make films with his camera

throughout his career, therefore first stage and second stage films were both produced and released together for many of the later decades of the artist's life.

Of greater relevance are those works that do not fit into either category. Perhaps the most obvious examples are *Mothlight* (1963), *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (1981) and *Chinese Series* (2003). These films were made without the use of the camera but neither were they hand-painted. For *Mothlight* and *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Brakhage adopted a collage process, using natural objects, including flora and fauna. In *Mothlight*, Brakhage stuck moth's wings, leaves and bits of plants between strips of perforated tape. The work most closely resembles a collage that reveals "both the beauty and horror of life and death" (Grauer, 1998). *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is made up of different 'body-parts' of vegetation (stem, leaf, bud and petals). The collage method used in both of these works is relevant in other areas of Brakhage's work, including the layering of photographic images, methods of adding other materials outside paint to the celluloid as well as changing the material of the celluloid by scratching or dissolving the film surface. Both examples don't fit into either the first or second stage, as it involved neither the camera nor the process of painting. This collage technique received significant attention within Brakhage's more prolific period of filmmaking. However, the absence of the camera also connects the works to the second stage collection. This is also true of *Chinese Series* (2003). This film is well-known because of its poignant real-life significance near the end of Brakhage's life. His last film, *Chinese Series* was made as Brakhage was dying. The production method was dictated by his decreasing health, meaning he couldn't hold up a camera or paint images. Instead, he scratched the emulsion surface and used his own spit to create the images. The film was then printed following his death, using the artist's instructions. Whilst adopting another production process, *Chinese Series* does not (and could not) adopt the method of painting. It is therefore not part of the hand-painted production, although its creative process shares some key similarities. There are few Brakhage films, such as *Mothlight*, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and *Chinese Series*, that sit in between the first and second stages<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup>*Gift* (1972) has not been included because of its authorship status, the paint, mould and camera images created by another artist. The film is described as "A 'found object' of paint and mold' given to Brakhage by the poet David Meltzer. According to Jane Brakhage, 'Stan did nothing to it but see it, splice it, and add titles'" (Barrett & Brabner in Vergé, 2016, p. 199).

## **Defining the shift**

The parameters of the first and second stage collections are quite simple; the first stage works were made with the camera, the second stage works were made without the camera and instead involved a painted mode of production. However, the shift between these two stages is far from transparent and it is impossible to signpost a neat transition between the two. Instead, the conditions leading up to the development of the second stage can be traced throughout decades of filmmaking, from the earlier first-stage through to the 1980s. The growing irrelevance of the camera between the first and second stage is of huge significance, the camera had previously held such a revered status within Brakhage's films. Therefore, the historical context surrounding the shift from first-stage to second-stage is hugely important in understanding how the hand-painted works were developed and the reception that they received.

### *Structuralist and post-modernist film*

Whilst the second stage collection has received very little critical attention, the shift taking place between the lyrical films and the hand-painted films has been explored in some detail, for various reasons. This period has drawn attention for the difficulties Brakhage was having at this time, that coincided (or linked directly to) his general decline from current avant-garde trends. From the late 1960s to the late 1980s, many things changed across the avant-garde and in Brakhage's personal life that impacted his career. Of most significance was the progression of the avant-garde movement. By the late 1960s, the lyrical film had enjoyed an established and prolific status in avant-garde film across two decades, meaning that "Brakhage's work was taken to be the norm for avant-garde film" (Peterson, 1994, p. 61). By the late 1960s and early 1970s, new trends of filmmaking began to develop, in relatively quick succession, which moved away from the personal and romantic tendencies of Brakhage's works.

The first, chronologically, was the brief rise of Structuralism in the mid-1960s, as termed by Sitney. Structuralist film "developed a minimal strain [that] rejected the heightened subjectivity of the film poem and its standard stylistic devices: erratic camera movement and cutting, allusive metaphors, improvisational form" (Peterson, 1994, p. 71). The style of film described by Peterson summarised Brakhage's lyrical film, and his mode of filmmaking, which began to stagnate and decline as a trend within the avant-garde. Structural film, instead, offered a more objective perception. The structuralist film was engaged in visual

investigation, such as of an object or landscape, which was explored and considered *through* the film structure. This form returned avant-garde film towards narrative once more, “the structuralist [has] modelled his approach on that of linguistics, which offers the model of linear, narrative forms” (‘A History of the American Avant-Garde Cinema’, 1976, p. 26). Structural film saw the rise and development of new filmmakers, such as Hollis Frampton and Andy Warhol, the latter of whom is broadly credited with creating this new style of filmmaking (although Paul Arthur [1978-79] suggests Brakhage’s *Mothlight* was a critical moment on the move towards structural film, demonstrating an intense focus on the moth as the 'object' of the film).

Structural film had all but disappeared by 1974, quickly replaced by a very different and new approach within the avant-garde, this time through a post-modernist lens. Although completely different to structural film, a key similarity was the assault on modernist, romantic and personal film. Post-modernism across film instead progressed the avant-garde towards a site of multiple thoughts, styles and visions co-existing within the wider movement. Political and feminist perspectives became particularly significant at this time. Feminism drew attention to the outdated elements of the modernist avant-garde, including the male-orientated culture that had developed, symbolised by the secondary role of women within the movement up until this stage, including the house-wife role of women often portrayed in home movies (of which Jane Brakhage, Stan’s first wife has been considered in light of <sup>5</sup>). Most significantly, for this study, was the diversity and depth of postmodernism that contrasted with the linear trends and fashions that had dictated the modernist avant-garde. Kristen Thompson and David Bordwell summarise this succinctly, writing:

There was a growing sense that, in all media, avant-garde activity had reached a steady state. Some critics proposed that the idea of one stylistic movement following another was no longer valid. In this sense, post-modernism was understood not as a particular style but rather as a diffuse pluralism. After Structural Film, arguably the last unified movement in experimental cinema, artists would pursue a variety of styles, none of which would dominate (2003, p. 600).

Whilst structuralist film and post-modernism offered very different outlooks within the avant-garde, the impact on Brakhage and the hand-painted works was relatively similar. Both progressed the photographic focus of the avant-garde, continuing the important role of the

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<sup>5</sup> Patricia Mellencamp wrote, “While it might be true that ‘woman’ was not blatantly exchanged or grotesquely commodified by avant-garde films, neither was she centrally figured. ‘She’ seemed to vanish with very few traces, except as allied partisan, liberated lover, or filmed mother/muse- a ‘bearer rather than making of meaning’ so literally enacted in Brakhage’s films of the births of his children, starring his wife, Jane. ‘She’ was no longer a problem, but ‘she’ was silenced only momentarily” (1990, p. 12).



camera in filming. For the second stage works this continued to leave the hand-painted images of little interest in either a practical or academic sense, as they did not fit the avant-garde fashion at this time. In a letter to Brakhage, Carmen Vigil confirmed this:

I feel as you said once that your later films haven't received the critical attention they deserved (not in amount but in adequacy) since they are for the most part non-metaphorical, non-structural, non-mythical, that is they don't seem to fit in with P. Adams present categories. (1972, Box 33, Folder 11).

Brakhage's status within the avant-garde more widely had also changed significantly. It was not just his hand-painted works that were irrelevant to the main areas of progression of avant-garde film, his lyrical style of filmmaking had also become passé. The new 'Eighties Generation' of filmmakers were keen to pave their own filmmaking path that purposefully rejected the personal and romantic style of filmmaking, which was no longer considered revolutionary but conventional and outdated. In essence, it represented everything the avant-garde was meant to fight against- the norm, the established and the predictable. Those who continued to champion this message, despite the changed trends in the avant-garde movement were "treated as relics, 'hangovers' of the 60s" (Brakhage, 2003, p. 13). This change in direction within the avant-garde destroyed many of Brakhage's friendships with other artists, whose work he disagreed with and spoke out against. Before their divorce, Jane described Brakhage as 'bitter' towards people and society. In a letter to Walter Chappell she wrote, "He even hasn't done any work for a couple months, unlike him" (1979, Box 8, Folder 8). Demonstrating his commitment (or stubbornness) towards his own approaches to film, Brakhage refused to follow the changing trends of the avant-garde world, remaining true to his personal and romantic style of filmmaking. The impact of this was his growing insignificance to the avant-garde of this period, although his past achievements were still held in high esteem. David James explains this development succinctly when he writes:

[T]he specific constituents of Brakhage's aesthetics that had made him prototypical of the great flowering of non-commodity filmmaking in the 1960s made him apparently irrelevant for the 1980s. [...] At least some recognition of him became unavoidable in college textbooks and anthologies of film theory, and wherever the idea of an alternative film culture still had credibility, his achievements had to be acknowledged. But, overall Brakhage was negatively positioned in respect to developments in the moving-image culture of the last quarter of the twentieth century (2005, p. 13).

#### *The Academy and financial problems*

As James' quote implies, whilst Brakhage's role as a filmmaker decreased at this time, he did, like many others, find some refuge in academia. This was an expanding area in the latter half of the twentieth century, developed from the interest and significance that the avant-garde

movement had procured. Brakhage joined in, teaching at both the Art Institute of Chicago and, in 1981, the University of Colorado, where he was made a Professor and worked up until the last few months of his life. This confirmed his historical relevance to the avant-garde movement (through his celebrated first-stage developments for film) and recognised his esteemed knowledge of filmmaking and of the avant-garde world (although Brakhage would only agree to teach the history of the avant-garde rather than practical filmmaking). Viewings of his works at academic institutions also offered Brakhage some important income, something which was otherwise lacking by this time. The filmmaker himself lamented, "Those who can teach, such as I, survive, but barely" (Brakhage, 1969, Box 10 Folder 4). These phases of economic struggle impacted his family but also his opportunities for filmmaking, which was expensive. Jane commented in 1979 that Brakhage had "been pretty down lately- numbers of old friends turning on him, film as art seeming to fade from people's minds, money sagging. Rough times" (Brakhage, J., 1969, Box 13 Folder 13). The increasing costs of film stock at this time also did not help. Films were sometimes produced at the expense of his personal and family life, often relying on friends for financial support. Brakhage's personal correspondence, found at the Brakhage archives, Colorado, gives a useful insight into this moment of his life. In one letter he demonstrated the sacrifices he made for his filmmaking, writing "We'll be scrimping next several months on food and pleasures to be paying for this little beaut!" (Brakhage, 1981, Box 10 Folder 10). In another, this time to Massimo Bacigalupo, Brakhage highlighted his bitterness towards those in the wider avant-garde movement. In thanking Massimo for his support, he wrote, "Jane and I were so happily moved that you sent a check for rental of Songs that I don't know quite how to overcome your sense of this being 'small' other than to let you know that most now ignore or forget us entirely" (Brakhage, 1985, Box 3, Folder 13).

This landscape of financial concern and dwindling interest signalled the economic difficulties facing Brakhage's filmmaking. However, the hand-painted style was significant in its financial benefits for Brakhage, it was a more affordable method of film production. No film stock was developed for the hand-painted works, reducing the cost of the film process. Additionally, the length of time needed to create a hand-painted film was significantly greater, reducing the number of films created and therefore the costs of Brakhage's filmmaking. Fred Camper explained, "painting and scratching on each frame is so time-consuming that his total output in terms of footage is reduced, thereby lowering his yearly filmmaking expense" (2001, p. 87). A day of painting equated to approximately three seconds of footage, which resulted in some hand-painted works (lasting a few minutes long) being created over a number of years.

Additionally, because of the mode of production, Brakhage could also recycle used film footage, painting over existing photographic images, to once again reduce the cost of production (I will distinguish between such works that include photographic imagery and 'purely' hand-painted works later in this chapter).

### *The end of a marriage*

Whilst not taking place until 1987 (by which time Brakhage's hand-painted style of filmmaking was established), the end of Brakhage's first marriage is often stressed as a significant moment in Brakhage's later life. Brakhage had been married to Jane for over thirty years, she and their children had played a primary, active role in his life, and therefore his filming throughout his earlier, golden age. Some of his hand-painted works were created as a result of Brakhage's situation and his emotions at the time of their separation. One example includes *Hell Itself*, the hand-painted film within *The Dante Quartet* (1987). Brakhage explained the work was made "during the break up with Jane and the collapse of my whole life, so I got to know quite well the streaming of the hypnagogic that's hellish" (Brakhage in James, 2005, p. 92). Brakhage's reference to hypnagogic vision relates to the new visual methodology that inspired the hand-painted films. Hypnagogic, or closed-eye vision, were terms coined by Brakhage that related to 'inward' vision, the visual patterns experienced when the eyelids were closed. Unsurprisingly, Brakhage turned to non-photographic means to create these visual images as the camera couldn't create the non-representational and abstract visual images that resembled his personal visual experience. He explained, "[T]here was no way I could get the camera inside my head or create a photographic equivalent of those shapes streaming across my closed eyes" (Ganguly, 1994, p. 24). The turmoil of emotion in the *Dante Quartet*, one of Brakhage's most well-known later works, has, from Brakhage's own comments, revolved largely around the personal difficulties in his life at this time resulting from the breakdown of his first marriage.

### *Re-defining the shift*

The elements outlined above are frequently discussed in regards to Brakhage's 'falling out' with avant-garde film. This period of his life was difficult for personal and professional reasons, both of which were impacted also by the progressive change of the avant-garde at this time. As a result, it is unsurprising that this time has been portrayed negatively, leaving the hand-painted collection situated within a dark corner of Brakhage's oeuvre.

However, when focusing on the creation of the hand-painted style, this phase can be considered in a much more positive manner. Despite the pessimistic context of the collection, Brakhage proactively chose to follow this course of filmmaking for positive and passionate reasons. His own comments surrounding his hand-painted films demonstrated his interest and excitement in this line of work, which offered new visionary perspectives through the medium of film, even though the avant-garde movement showed little interest in these progressions. The most significant element of this optimistic approach to the hand-painted films is Brakhage's visual methodology. As I have outlined, closed eye or hypnagogic vision was a visual methodology that moved beyond the lyrical film. It extended the parameters of vision to include that which is perceived behind the eye-lids, a new perception of vision. For Brakhage, hand-painted methods enabled him to most closely depict and represent this visual experience. Whilst this may have increased the abstract possibilities of the works, Brakhage was always dedicated to this methodological inspiration behind his images. He recognised that "[T]he danger with painting on film is that it could turn into decoration and when it does, I throw it away" (Ganguly, 1994, p. 25). This opinion is significant in disputing the art-for-art's sake argument that Brakhage's works were often criticised for. Despite this, Brakhage's approach to hand-painted film was extremely positive. He vocalised his excitement in this new area of film that became "the favourites of my work. In fact, all I want to do now is paint on film" (Ganguly, 1994, p. 24).

In this light, Brakhage's hand-painted style of filming can be considered as a natural progression of the artist's own creative practices and visual perceptions. The methodology of closed-eye vision evidences Brakhage's personal development of his visual experiences and perceptions, widening the parameters of vision. This also continues a wider progression that can be traced throughout Brakhage's full oeuvre- the development of personal and private vision. As noted, Brakhage's lyrical mode of filmmaking was celebrated for the reduction of classical narrative elements (see Chapter Three). His documentary style of filming and his role behind the camera highlighted the personal life and experiences of himself as filmmaker and as person. Closed-eye vision can be seen to develop this further- excluding photographic imagery of the material world to deepen the personal knowledge and experience contained within his films. Whilst this progression was not of interest to the avant-garde movement, the location of the hand-painted films within Brakhage's own oeuvre emphasises the development of his own aesthetic style, building on his own visual, personal and romantic capabilities through film.

Another positive element surrounding this new visual methodology can be found in Brakhage's personal life. Moving on from the despair he felt at the end of his first marriage, Brakhage married his second wife, Marilyn, in 1989, signalling the start of a happier period in his life. From Brakhage's own comments, Marilyn influenced his new visual aesthetics, helping closed-eye vision to develop, through her discomfort at having her and her family's life photographed. This has previously been depicted as a change enforced upon Brakhage, but from the filmmaker's own perspective, this coincided with the personal journey he was already on:

One of the reasons why Marilyn doesn't like to have her picture taken is because like me she senses some falsification in the process. Now, I could have gone on photographing myself and the children- done a series of self-portraits- she has never forbidden me, but it's just that my sense of the aesthetic has changed, and that's largely due to my conversations with her. Also, after the second marriage I felt a strong desire to have my life rather than photograph it. So now I feel the autobiographical mode is essentially finished in every other sense except that naturally whatever I make will have something of myself in it, but I don't want to be conscious of that- I'd rather just let it happen. (Ganguly, 1994, p19).

This continues to reflect Brakhage's personal and professional progression that developed through his hand-painted style. It demonstrates the significance of this body of works to the filmmaker, which embodied changes within his personal and professional life within a different and difficult phase of the wider avant-garde movement. However, it also demonstrates how meaningful this collection of works was for Brakhage. Despite the negativity and changes felt by Brakhage through avant-garde film at this time, the hand-painted works offered an innovative new area of study and new insights into the possibilities of the medium.

Both the negative and positive approaches are relevant in evaluating Brakhage's aesthetic shift between the first and second stages of his oeuvre. The diverse range of possibilities behind the shift demonstrates the significance of his personal life to his works. All of Brakhage's works are personal investigations of living through the eyes, and skills, of a filmmaker. They reflect the ups and downs that come with life and Brakhage, as a documentary maker, couldn't help but embed such changes into his creative work. There is therefore a cyclical relationship behind his films and his life always, and the transition period between the first and second stage works evidences this concretely. In relation to this study, this demonstrates how interesting and important the second-stage collection is. These works evidence Brakhage's progressions as an artist, an under-explored phase of Brakhage's career that offered new developments and insights into the possibilities of film. As I demonstrated earlier, these progressions did not follow the development of the avant-garde; it progressed

an earlier modernist, romantic and personal strand of film that started to wane across the 1960s and 1970s. Brakhage's developments therefore had little wider value to contribute to the direction of the avant-garde movement at this time. This demonstrates why the hand-painted style has received so little critical attention and analysis. Thanks to the widening of film parameters through post-modernist approaches, this style of film has not been significantly revived. Consequently, Brakhage's hand-painted films, to this day, have remained an under-explored and under-valued area of film.

### **Hand-painted film: Introducing the Second Stage Collection**

As I have stated, this is the first time in which the hand-painted films have been separated from Brakhage's camera-made works as a different style and approach to film. Therefore, the current knowledge of this second stage collection is extremely limited. The most likely reason this division has not already been analysed is the unclear boundary between camera and hand-painted styles of film. Throughout his career, Brakhage consistently experimented with new methods that changed the materiality of the celluloid, in order to create aesthetic effects that best represented his visual experiences. Brakhage often scratched the film surface, a technique demonstrated as early as 1955 in the psychodrama, *Reflections on Black*. Many of his films ended with scratched credits that read 'By Brakhage', a technique he started because he couldn't afford official credits. However, it quickly became a style Brakhage felt epitomised his personal mode of film. Brakhage also experimented with a range of other techniques, adding materials to the celluloid surface (p. 24) as well as spoiling or eroding the celluloid surface with bleach or acid. Between 1961-1964, Brakhage introduced paint to his photographic images. As Suranjan Ganguly notes in 'The 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday Interview' with Stan Brakhage, it is in *Dog Star Man* (1961-1964) that paint is added to the film celluloid for the first time. At this stage of his career, adding paint to the film celluloid was one technique among many within a photographic film. The images were shot, developed and then materials, such as paint, were added over the top to create the visual aesthetic Brakhage had strived for. The intermittent use of paint techniques had been applied in films across Brakhage's oeuvre to varying degrees. As such, Brakhage's painting technique may not have been considered in isolation to the artist's photographic films as it has previously played a part within this style of film. It was not a new technique in its own right, even within Brakhage's work. This resulted in a lack of engagement with those films which expanded the hand-painted style whilst discarding the role of the camera. The gradual progression of Brakhage's paint on film is of great interest, his oeuvre offers insightful

evidence into his developed techniques and aesthetics through paint. However, in this study, films that are chiefly photographic, with some painted images, are not considered examples of hand-painted film. The quantity of hand-painted images in films such as *Dog Star Man* are very small in relation to the piece as a whole, used sparingly for particular visual effects at certain moments of the film.

This thesis is interested in the creation of films made up of hand-painted images, where the painted technique is the core focus and structure of the film. This distinction is necessary in confirming the exact definition of a hand-painted film, to prevent any confusion concerning the many hybrid films in Brakhage's oeuvre, created using a multitude of different techniques. However, this also makes the job of identifying purely hand-painted films more complex- a much-needed task required as part of this study. In attempting to distinguish the second stage works within Brakhage's oeuvre, I have used three techniques. Firstly, I have used existing research, including interviews, academic writing and film reviews. Of particular help was *The Film-Makers' Cooperative* website from The New American Cinema Group, "the largest archive and distributor of independent avant-garde films in the world" (<http://film-makerscoop.com/>). The synopsis of each Brakhage film on this website was of great help in identifying some of the works made from hand-painted images. Further research helped identify potential hand-painted works through descriptions that suggest hand-painted images are involved. Whilst existing research on this area of film was limited, brief descriptions and film overviews offered critical clues to the production methods (camera or hand-painted). However, it was clear that existing research did not uncover all the hand-painted works. Many synopses came directly from Brakhage, including a number of poetic and/or abstract descriptions that could neither suggest nor rule out the use of hand-painting. Similarly, the limited pool of critical analysis on this style offered restricted support in identifying hand-painted films. The evidenced lack of academic attention in this area meant other research options were required.

My second method of research involved viewing Brakhage's works. In addition to identifying the hand-painted works I have been keen to view as many of these works as possible as part of this study. This was also a difficult task due to the limited access to screenings of Brakhage's films. Specific and often historic film equipment is needed to screen the works using projectors, which are not easily accessed (this equipment is not available at the University of Portsmouth, for example). More complex is the limited number of places which stock copies of Brakhage's films, many of which do not have a full collection of his works.

Throughout my study I have viewed films at the University of Colorado, the only organisation outside of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Hollywood that, to my knowledge, holds copies of all Brakhage works (or all those still available)<sup>6</sup>. On one trip to Colorado, and to the Brakhage archives based here, I viewed six works. Additionally, a further five films were viewed at LUX, the UK's "only significant collection of artists' film and video, and the largest distributor of such work in Europe" ('About us', n.d.). Existing DVD collections of Brakhage's works have also been of great value, including *"By Brakhage: An Anthology Volumes One and Two"* (2003), (although this comes with its own set of frustrating viewing complications for non-USA viewers due to the collection's American DVD settings). *Re:Voir* also published a VHS of "Stan Brakhage's Hand-Painted Films (1984-95). This would have been an extremely useful source, offering an opportunity to view a number of key hand-painted works (although not all of them). However, unfortunately *Re:Voir* never released this on DVD and is therefore no longer being distributed, making it increasingly difficult to obtain<sup>7</sup>. In addition to these formal methods, a number of works are also available on more open channels such as YouTube and Vimeo. This method of research was not only of great value for viewing the works myself but helped confirm whether a potential hand-painted film was indeed made in this way.

Finally, perhaps the most valuable source in identifying the full list of hand-painted films was Émilie Vergé's *Catalogue raisonné on Stan Brakhage* (2016). This valuable catalogue lists Brakhage's entire oeuvre along with synopses of varying lengths and relevant information on the film itself, including running time, film size and the archives that hold each film. This catalogue does not identify whether films are hand-painted or not, although many hand-painted films do mention the hand-painted technique or images within their description. I was fortunate enough to meet Émilie in 2015 at a conference, *New Approaches to Stan Brakhage* at the Birbeck, University of London. Through email correspondence, Émilie was extremely helpful in confirming the hand-painted method in a number of films through her own research (and viewings) as well as adding additional works that belong to this collection. I am extremely grateful for her very kind help, which was of the utmost value to this study.

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<sup>6</sup>Significant other collections can be found at Canyon Cinema in San Francisco and at the Filmmakers Co-Op in New York. Outside of America, the Pompidou Centre in Paris has a large collection whilst the LUX in London also has substantial resources

<sup>7</sup> The difference between the success of the Brakhage Anthology and the *Re:Voir* could be tied to the content, *Re:Voir* took a bold step in focusing on only the filmmaker's hand-painted films. Unfortunately the fact that the *Re:Voir* collection did not make it to DVD can be used to demonstrate the lack of interest in these works.



Through a combination of these three methods, I succeeded in putting together what I hoped was a complete list of works belonging to the hand-painted collection. However, not all the works on the list excluded photographic images. As discussed, to decrease the cost of film production, Brakhage recycled reels of film with old photographic images on them. Some of these reels displayed his own unused work: "I dug this out a trash basket. I'd always wanted to work with 35mm but I could never afford it [...] and decided to spend some time painting it" (Brakhage, Box 55, Folder 2). Others were gifted to him by friends and fellow filmmakers, using their own or found footage. Brakhage used the photographic images to varying degrees; with some he incorporated elements of the photography into his film and in other instances the images are hardly visible or not visible at all when viewing. This creates a clear complexity in both categorising and identifying films belonging to the hand-painted collection.

Therefore, in categorising them, I created two definitions within the collection: the 'pure' hand-painted works and the 'extended' collection. The pure hand-painted works are those made without any photographic images at all; these works are the core focus of this study because they most fully embody the hand-painted identity. The extended collection, however, is still of great value and interest. Unlike *Dog Star Man*, the hand-painted style in these works are of primary focus within the images, however they do all include some symbiotic relationship with photographic images. As mentioned, the level of camera images varies in each, in some it feels impossible to spot. Although harder to confirm, it is likely that some of these extended films do not include images photographed by Brakhage himself (through recycled celluloid gifted to him), therefore the camera-made element of the work can be considered secondary in nature. Yet, because of their contrasting nature to camera-made works, it is very important to acknowledge and distinguish these works from those that truly meet the hand-painted criteria and abandon the role of the camera within the filmmaking process. The list below can also be found in Appendix One: *List of Stan Brakhage's hand-painted films*.

## **The Second Stage collection:**

### ***The pure hand-painted works***

Skein (1974)

Nodes (1981)

Hell Spit Flexion (1983) (later included in the *Dante Quartet* [1987])

Loud Visual Noises (2 versions: 1986, 1987)

Three Hand-Painted Films (Night Music, Rage Net, Glaze of Cathexis) (1990)

The Thatch of Night (1990)

Untitled (For Marilyn) (1992)

Boulder Blues and Pearls and... (1992)

The Harrowing/ Tryst Haunt (1993)

Blossom Gift/ Favor (1993)

Study in Colour and Black and White (1993)

Three Homerics (Diana Holding Back the Night, The Rolling Sea and Love Again) (1993)

Ephemeral Solidity (1993)

Stellar (1993)

Autumnal (1993)

Naughts (1994)

Chartres Series (1994)

Elementary Phrases (1994) (\*with Phil Solomon)

Black Ice (1994)

Cannot Not Exist (1994)

I Take These Truths (1994)

Paranoia Corridor (1995)

We Hold These (1995)

I... (1995)

Earthen Aerie (1995)

Spring Cycle (1995)

The 'b' Series (1995)

In Consideration of Pompeii (1995)

Preludes (...) 1-24 (1995-1996)

Shockingly Hot (1996)

Blue Value (1996)

Polite Madness (1996)  
The Fur of Home (1996)  
Beautiful Funerals (1996)  
Sexual Saga (1996)  
Concrescence (1996) (\*with Phil Solomon)  
Divertimento (1996)  
Last Hymn to the Night- Novalis (1997)  
The Birds of Paradise (1999)  
The Earthsong of the Cricket (1999)  
Cricket Requiem (1999)  
The Lion and the Zebra Make God's Raw Jewels (1999)  
Stately Mansions did Decree (1999)  
Coupling (1999)  
The Dark Tower (1999)  
Cloud Chamber (1999)  
The Jesus Trilogy and Coda (2000)  
Water for Maya (2000)  
Persian Series 1-5 (1999)  
Persian Series 6-12 (2000)  
Occam's Thread (2001)  
Persian Series 13-18 (2001)  
Rounds (2001)  
Micro-Garden (2001)  
Lovesong 1-6 (2001-2002)  
Dark Night of the Soul (2002)  
Ascension (2002)  
Resurrectus Est (2002)  
Song of the Mushroom (2002)  
Panels for the Walls of Heaven (2002)  
\*Seasons (2002): By Phil Solomon and Stan Brakhage

### ***The extended hand-painted works***

Thigh Line Lyre Triangular (1961)  
The Horseman, The Woman and the Moth (1968)  
Eyemyth [educational print] (1972)  
The Wold-Shadow (1972)  
Songs 1-7 (1980) (Song 4 is hand-painted)  
Songs 8-14 (1980) (Song 14 is hand-painted)  
Songs 16-22 (1980) (Song 16 and 21 are hand-painted)  
Aftermath (1981)  
Caswallon Trilogy (1986) (Fireloop is hand-painted)  
The Loom (1986)  
The Dante Quartet (1987) (Hell Spit Flexion is hand-painted)  
Delicacies of Molten Horror Synapse (1991)  
Interpolations 1-5 (1992) (Interpolations 2,3,4, and 5 are hand-painted)  
From: First Hymn to the Night- Novalis (1994) (mixed with text)  
Cannot Exist (1994)  
The Lost Films (1995)  
Through Wounded Eyes (1996) (with Joel Haertling)  
Yggdrasill: Whose Roots Are Stars in the Human Mind (1997)  
...(ellipses) Part 1 (1998) ('Reel' 1,2,4 and 5 are hand-painted)  
Garden Path (2001) (\*with Mary Beth Reed)  
Night Mulch & Very (2001) (mixed with text)

Through the research methods outlined above, I am confident that this list offers the most extensive and accurate representation of hand-painted works possible, with the resources available to me. Unfortunately, I have not been able to view all of the works I believe to be hand-painted, or all of the works in Brakhage's oeuvre to ensure I have captured them all (although this would be no mean feat for, as Fred Camper writes, "it may be that only Brakhage himself has seen every one of them" (2001, p. 69)). The issues with accessing the works is a crucial problem for modern-day audiences. This is particularly true in Europe, as no organisation holds copies of all Brakhage's films and, due to demand, access to celluloid and projection equipment is significantly decreasing. This poses key questions about the access and relevance of Brakhage to modern-day audiences (as I explore in Chapter Four).

The most difficult element of identifying these works has been confirming their correct category, particularly in deliberating whether each film includes any photographic images hidden below the paint. The lack of research surrounding this has exacerbated this problem, as has the lack of access to the original film celluloid. Close investigation of the original frames would be the most accurate way to clarify their pure or extended nature. There is, therefore, additional research that could be done to further confirm or increase the accuracy of this, I would be delighted if this thesis encourages such extensive study.

However, the creation of this list, the most comprehensive available for the hand-painted films, is highly significant. Identifying the hand-painted works draws attention to these films because of this method of production. Some of these works have received little to no critical reception, thus belonging to this identity is crucial, offering an approach by which their importance can be understood and explored further. Now that the hand-painted films have been identified, I will further explore the core elements of the production of hand-painted films (including technique and inspiration) across Chapters Two and Three of this thesis to develop critical analysis in this area.

In summary, this chapter has offered a new method of categorising Brakhage's works, coining the term 'second stage collection' for the artist's hand-painted works. The existence of the second stage collection acknowledges the painterly qualities of these works as the primary method of production, in direct contrast to the more conventional and prolific photographic works that fall under the first stage collection. I have also devoted substantial time to considering the wider historical framing of this style of filmmaking. This has been hugely significant in understanding the context surrounding the collection. It has also helped answer key questions around the lack of critical analysis and attention towards the hand-painted works and their chronological setting in both Brakhage's own oeuvre and the trends within the wider avant-garde movement. The findings from these questions (surrounding the fashionable trends of the avant-garde movement and their filmic identity outside of the camera) will play crucial roles across this thesis. They have highlighted specific gaps in knowledge across both Brakhage's oeuvre and more widely within the medium (and therefore the possibilities) of film. Engaging with these theoretical areas will play a crucial role in the next chapter. Identifying the hand-painted works and clarifying the collection as distinct from the first-stage works was a critical first step for this thesis. Now that these aims have been achieved, my attention will turn to the creative production method used by Brakhage. I will aim to draw attention to the ways in which Brakhage's production process

relates to the unique identity of the second-stage and how the hand-painted artworks can be further explored. This will help sincerely build understanding of the impact and implications of Brakhage's hand-painted film.

## Chapter Two: The Filmmaker's Experience

In Chapter One I argued for the existence of a second-stage collection in Brakhage's oeuvre, made up of hand-painted films. This body of works, I demonstrated, required different consideration to the first-stage camera works because of the significant contrast in style, motivation and historical context. As part of my focus on production, this chapter will explore Brakhage's production method for creating the hand-painted films. It aims to understand how these films were made, including the overarching connection to Brakhage's life experience, the literal method of creating hand-painted film and the authorial control that Brakhage had over these works. This is vital in demonstrating the differences between the first and second stage collection, evidencing the unique elements of Brakhage's hand-painted film in contrast to his more prevalent, well-known camera-based filmmaking. The production method also sheds much-needed light on a very different approach to filmmaking, which will help in clarifying the hand-painted collection's connection to the medium of film and, more widely, across the arts.

### **A phenomenological approach: Brakhage's experience**

Through its focus on production, the first half of this thesis centres on Brakhage's experience in creating the hand-painted films. As the artist of these works, his experiences and views are of critical interest to the development of this style of art. His perception of the works also offers potential significance to the meaning available through the hand-painted films, as I will explore. In Chapter One I considered the personal and romantic qualities of Brakhage's filmmaking. For Brakhage, filmmaking was a way in which to process life and experience, he "invented a form in which the film-maker could compress his thoughts and feelings while recording his direct confrontation with intense experiences" (Sitney, 1979, p. 150). His camera-based, lyrical works have been particularly recognised for articulating living experience through visual channels as a "film journal or diary, in which the filmmaker records impressions or daily existence" (Thompson & Bordwell, 2003, p. 498). This is particularly evident in Brakhage's camera-works as the photographic images visualise the material world in which Brakhage is living in and experiencing. However, through Brakhage's explanations, the filmmaker's experience can also be understood in relation to the hand-painted films. The second-stage visual methodology, closed-eye vision, connects the hand-painted films to visual experiences when the eyes are closed. As Brakhage recounts:

I began conscious meditations on closed-eye vision, or hypnagogic vision as it's called. And it has been very important to me ever since... Somewhere after beginning to give attention to what I see when my eyes are closed, I recognised pattern likeness to Jackson Pollock's interwoven whirls of paint, and then I realised that I had seen it before [...]. It began very quickly to touch some childhood memories ('Excerpt of an interview transcript', Box 80, Folder 15, p. 26).

This emphasises the continued relevance of Brakhage's personal living experiences within the second-stage collection, which continues to draw upon his visual perception. Whilst the films do not portray the same level of photographic representation, and are therefore less recognisable as living experiences and memories, the hand-painted works exist as a direct result of Brakhage's experience of living and exploring the world around him. Investigating this experience and tracking its interpretation into hand-painted works of art is, consequently, an important part of the production of the second-stage collection.

Connecting Brakhage with experience is by no means a novel concept. It is inevitable that his works are linked to his personal life and memories; indeed, Brakhage encouraged this. His art is underpinned by his relationship with the world around him. This epitomises many overarching strands of the philosophy of phenomenology, which draws attention back to the primacy of experience, "reviving our living contact with reality" (Moran, 2000, p. 5). This method of philosophy, drawn from European, twentieth century thought, aimed to renew attention to direct living experience as a source of personal knowledge. This living knowledge was not considered existing or factual, but as a process, a direct and ongoing "act of bringing truth into being" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. xxii). Phenomenology depicts this continual process of living and learning knowledge through an inexhaustible and cyclical communication with the world around us. It is only through being in, and being part of, the world that we can form knowledge of it. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a prominent phenomenologist, particularly stressed the significance of the materiality of the physical world. His notion of the lived body demonstrated the relevance of this cyclical relationship between human and physical world, where both are impacted and changed by the continuous process of lived experience in the world. Merleau-Ponty therefore promoted the relevance of the physical world through his phenomenological theories, as opposed to simply consciousness. Let's consider again Merleau-Ponty's explanation that, "We never cease living in the world of perception, but we go beyond it in critical thought- almost to the point of forgetting the contribution of perception to our idea of truth" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 3). This philosophical perspective bears strong resemblance to Brakhage's own method of perception and reasons for filmmaking,



which challenged the limited importance placed on perception in society. Wees demonstrated Brakhage's anti-intellectual position when he wrote, "If Brakhage often speaks on behalf of the eye, it is to counterbalance what he feels to be our culture's bias in favour of the mind and our consequent failure to recognise how easily the mind can imprison itself in an abstract and diminished universe of its own making" (1992, p. 77). Even Merleau-Ponty and Brakhage's approach to direct experience demonstrates strong similarities. Merleau-Ponty described his perception as, "... constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my cleverly perceived world, yet which I nevertheless immediately 'place' in the world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams" (2002, p. xi). This depiction of a 'play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations' captures very closely the tone of Brakhage's fast-paced, personal and romantic barrage of coloured images in his filmmaking, when exploring his own personal perceptions of experience.

Another key phenomenological similarity between both Merleau-Ponty and Brakhage is the significance of art in exploring and making sense of this direct experience. Merleau-Ponty regularly drew on the art of painting, particularly that of Paul Cezanne, to demonstrate the awareness and reflective relationship between art and experience. In *The Role of Painting in the Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, Daniel Guentchev highlights the priority of the *practice* of phenomenology, as action, above simply thought and/or discussion. He writes,

Painting engages in a phenomenologically minded project in a way that phenomenology as a species of philosophy cannot quite do. Philosophy relies on verbal concept in order to talk about experience, while painting remains closer to the prereflective contact with the world. Painting points out aspects of visual experience to the viewer without necessarily conceptualizing it (2010, p. 1).

Brakhage also demonstrated this viewpoint in an interview, when asked about the meaning of his camera-made film, *Reflections on Black* (1955). He emphasised the significance of exploring direct perception through art as a meaningful process that cannot necessarily be depicted through verbal language. In his words, "[W]ell right away we run into an interesting paradox, that if I were able to speak with language more than what I could say visually with that film I would be an idiot to make films- because it is much cheaper to write and cheaper yet to talk" ('Stan Brakhage- Biography', n.d., Box 55 Folder 7). This draws attention to the relationship between perception and art. It suggests the existence of an active, phenomenological process that transfers or develops direct experience into film. Therefore, when looking at the art of filmmaking through a phenomenological lens, there is a need to identify

different aspects or stages of experience that bridge the direct living experience and the creative process of making film. John Dewey recognises the separation between these two elements in *Art as Experience* (2005). He explains:

Since 'artistic' refers primarily to the act of production and 'esthetic' to that of perception and enjoyment, the absence of a term designating the two processes taken together is unfortunate. Sometimes, the effect is to separate the two from each other, to regard art as something superimposed upon esthetic material, or, upon the other side, to an assumption that, since art is a process of creation, perception and enjoyment of it have nothing common with the creative act (p. 48).

Dewey also commented on the relationship between production and reception here but also suggested an absence of understanding between the perception and enjoyment of lived experience and the creative process of art-making, which is inspired from lived experience. I will demonstrate that exploring both of these areas (production and perception) within the wider notion of Brakhage's creative experience is crucial for examining the creation of the hand-painted films. I have therefore explored the production of the hand-painted films through two stages of experience: the direct experience and the creative experience.

### **The Direct Experience**

The direct experience reflects most closely the primacy of experience that phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty in particular, champion. I have deployed Dewey's term, *direct experience* (2005, p. 15) to draw attention back to the stimulus or inspiration that *must* lie behind artwork. Even with artworks that don't bear such strong resemblance to perception and experience (as Brakhage's do), lived experience cannot be separated from the existence of the artwork. This is because "man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. xii). It is not possible to separate inspiration from artwork from our lived experience, as all forms of knowledge and perception derive from our individual lived experience. This also suggests that direct experience is a continuous process, our constant location within the tangible world means direct knowledge from lived experience is ongoing. In relation to art, however, direct experience is isolated from the notion of creative experience through our intent. Direct experience relates to time where focus is fully centred on lived experience of the world around us in an innocent and pre-reflective fashion. We are not aware of the experience itself as the object of our attention, it is a live and active process at the moment it takes place. Boyd Miller discusses this similarly as *phenomenological directness*, which he defines as (quoting P. Stawson) "an *immediate* consciousness of the existence of things outside us" (Philosophical Studies, 2014, p. 235). He continues, "[W]hen you have

an experience of some particular phosphene that phosphene itself seems to be directly present to your consciousness in a way that it would not were you to merely think about or visualize it sometime later” (Philosophical Studies, 2014, p. 240). As such, direct experience offers natural and pre-reflective perception that is not applicable at other stages of the production process. It focuses on experience that “appears to consciousness before it has been submitted to critical or scientific reflection” (Merleau-Ponty, 1977, p. ix) (This argument is continued on p58 in exploring the connection between direct and creative experience).

Direct experience is highly personal and subjective, unique to the distinct ways in which individuals relate and react to their environment. It involves both the direct physical contact with the material world and the inner consciousness of any individual, embodied within the lived body. The significance of consciousness highlights a complexity in exploring Brakhage’s personal and subjective direct experience, surrounding the sensitive nature of the experience. His personal mode of filmmaking draws attention to his lived experience as stimulus and subject of his art. Therefore, to understand Brakhage’s personal meaning behind one of his hand-painted works, it is necessary to consider the subject of lived experience that is being explored. For W.K. Wimsatt Junior, this related to intentionality. Wimsatt’s notion of ‘Intentional Fallacy’ (exploring the medium of poetry) argued that the “design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard of judging the success of a work of literary art” (1970, p. 4). This thesis does not argue against the Intentional Fallacy; my division of this study into production and reception evidences my belief in different, relevant experiences of the hand-painted works outside of Brakhage’s alone. In addition, at the end of this chapter I will question to what extent Brakhage’s experiences are relevant outside of merely his own production experience. However, as I have argued in this chapter, exploring Brakhage’s phenomenological experience of the hand-painted works still offers a critical understanding of the works, the perspective of the artist. It is necessary to explore this insight in order to increase understanding of the production of the hand-painted works themselves. Wimsatt’s Intentional Fallacy is, at this point, most useful in its definition of intention. He wrote that intention “corresponds to *what he* [the author] *intended* in a formula which more or less explicitly has had wide acceptance” (1970, p. 4).

Yet, attempting to depict or describe Brakhage’s own direct experience is highly problematic. How can we truly know Brakhage’s experience or artistic intentions? Attempting to depict his direct lived experience greatly risks incorrectly defining his lived experience. This is especially problematic as Brakhage himself recognised film as a better medium for exploring his

lived experience than through language, as it was embedded as *part of* his lived experience. Despite this statement, there are many interviews and writings by Brakhage on the subject of his life, knowledge and films. In considering his lived experience (and the works regarding his lived experience), Brakhage's own descriptions offer the most authentic analysis. As Brakhage passed away in 2003, these primary sources offer the best insight into the lived experience that inspired the creation of his hand-painted films. Such sources are not devoid of risk or contradictions, as I will soon explore, but a key issue for the hand-painted films still revolves around the quantity of primary data that discussed the second-stage style. As many of the film synopses demonstrate, the hand-painted style resulted in a range of second-stage films, many of which explore different areas of direct experience.

The lack of analysis (by Brakhage) available on each film, significantly limits the primary knowledge of the direct experience behind the artwork. However, one interview offers perhaps the most significant and extensive insight into Brakhage's direct experience. In *'Stan Brakhage and Philip Hoffman discuss the positive and negative'* (1996, pp. 12-18), Brakhage drew upon the lived experience behind one particular hand-painted film, *Black Ice* (1994). The depth and breadth of Brakhage's account makes this interview a significant phenomenological source. In it, Brakhage recounted lived experience that led to a fall on black ice in the Colorado Mountains, the experience of which, he explains, he attempted to capture through the film. Hoffman opened the segment on *Black Ice* by asking about the fears Brakhage referenced when making the film. Brakhage responded, "First of all-I've had really crucial experiences with black ice" (p. 13). This demonstrates the significance of the film's subject matter, born out of the artist's lived experience. Black ice, the object, resulted in important lived experience for Brakhage and is something he came into contact with regularly because of where he lived. This has led to black ice being "a major crisis in my life, because I live in a place that produces a lot of it, and I'm walking on it back and forth between home and school most of the winter" (p. 31). Thus, Brakhage's lived experience included regular contact with black ice, which offered a sense of threat and a need for caution because of the nature of his contact with it. These conditions, and previous lived experience informed his knowledge and perception of black ice. However, as his narrative went on to demonstrate, the film is focused most significantly around one particular incident, a fall. Interestingly, Brakhage had very little recollection of the fall itself, despite it providing the stimulation for an artwork. He explained, "I don't even remember falling- it was that quick, I was standing- next I was walking about a block and a half away with blood running down my face" (p. 13). Perhaps it is this lack of memory of the direct fall itself that drew attention to the

direct experience for the artist. It signifies the role of unconscious thought within direct experience:

I'm depending on that aspect of the unconsciousness which is what I don't remember when I fell. It's in me somewhere obviously [...] and I don't remember also getting up and walking on...It's an interesting thing- I was walking the dogs at the time, at 9000 feet, up in the mountains where I was then living. The dogs were quite distressed and strange seeming, and I had blood running down my face, and I was walking them a block and a half roughly in city terms beyond where I had fallen, and then I went back to retrieve my gloves. [...] [I]t was my cold hands that made me begin to be aware as I was holding the leashes of the dogs that I had to go back to that spot and get my gloves and then I saw the black ice and the slippage where I'd slipped and the blood so I consciously reconstruct the whole scene, but all the rest of it's absolutely in the unconsciousness. And it's from that unconscious as in all my work that I'm trying to tap to get the fulsome story from the nervous system, from the whole nervous system, and it is compounded into a two minute and 40 second film (p. 14).

This description, in the interview with Philip Hoffman, suggests this direct experience was not consciously available to Brakhage himself. As a traumatic moment of lived experience, it is only through unconscious perception and retrospective rational thought that the artist attempted to create a full picture of the experience. Brakhage's lack of conscious memory in this particular direct experience might seem odd inspiration for a film. However, Brakhage explained that this experience had repercussions that impacted his later lived experience and his feelings on black ice:

For me, it meant the beginning of cataracts in one of my eyes- I had to have a cataracts operation. I now have a plastic lens sewn in, and it was a crisis. And within two years the other eye which had developed cataracts also began moving in that direction, and it all stemmed from that black ice experience- so now I have plastic sewn in both eyes. In addition to which I've made some clots so I have to take a blood thinner and I'll be on that for the rest of my life and that thins your blood artificially so I'm an artificial hemophiliac, so that means if I slip on black ice again, more than likely I'd bleed to death into the brain before they could do anything (p. 13).

This quote evidences the significance of that moment of lived experience as well as the repercussions the event would have on Brakhage's future lived experience, which he recognised not long after. The experience was therefore also relational, the direct experience of the fall had a material impact on Brakhage's lived experience, forever altering the vessel of the body.

Through this interview, Brakhage demonstrated the existence and role of direct experience within the art production process very clearly in relation to the film. His description evidenced the connection between his lived experience and the visual investigation at the heart of his artwork. Through his recount of the stimulus behind the film *Black Ice*, Brakhage

demonstrated phenomenological insight into his lived experience. The knowledge and sensory information felt through his direct experience explored his connection to his surroundings and the repercussions of this particularly eventful connection to the material world. By legitimising the role of direct experience in his art process, this offers a much-needed concrete connection for the hand-painted style to the physical world. In my introduction, I explored the absence of analysis on the hand-painted style because of its “resistance to verbal language” (James, 2003, p. 9). As the pure hand-painted images do not contain any photographic representation of the physical world, Brakhage’s narrative of this direct experience is highly significant in evidencing the phenomenological relationship between the works and the material world. Through this, he shared a poignant insight into his own lived experience and the way in which said experience inspired a visual investigation of its *meaning* through art. Whilst the films do not objectively reflect the physical world, Brakhage, like Merleau-Ponty, knew himself through being-in-the-world. Brakhage’s explanation of *Black Ice* is evidence of this, demonstrating the connection between his art and his lived experience. Therefore, from a production perspective, the film offers concrete, representational value through Brakhage’s lived experience that demonstrates the significance of phenomenology to the production method.

There are obvious complications with this method of exploring direct experience. As noted, it is not possible to speak on behalf of Brakhage or truly analyse the impact and effect of his lived experience. Brakhage’s clarity through this interview offers a unique insight into his direct experience but interviews can still be considered unreliable. The conversation was led by an interviewer, who instigated this area of conversation. Unlike Brakhage’s own writing, the interview was not written and edited by Brakhage himself, he did not have full control over the source (although Brakhage’s status within the avant-garde often impacted his role and control over the direction of interviews). Additionally, Brakhage himself explained that he created films because verbal communication could not express his experience in the way that art could. This implies a popular opinion in the avant-garde film movement that verbal communication cannot get to the heart of a meaning or feeling in the way that art can. This clearly illustrates a key weakness of adopting a verbal approach to capture the true nature of his experience. Similarly, Brakhage’s many personal and professional contradictions demonstrate the growing or contrasting analyses of his life and works given at different stages of his career. The depth and breadth of lived experience is critical in acknowledging the high possibility for alternative or additional views to be expressed at different moments of reflection.

Finally, this interview explores one of the better-known hand-painted works. The interview goes into little detail concerning the visuals of the film itself, but the direct experience demonstrates that *Black Ice* is one of Brakhage's most experiential works that does depict a clear, subjective experience. This is not always true of, or available for, other hand-painted films. This emphasises the limited value of this interview in considering the entire second-stage collection. It cannot offer a useful approach to direct experience behind the hand-painted style itself or other hand-painted films. It also does not represent an approach that is applicable to all of the hand-painted films, which suggests an entirely different relationship to direct experience. As Brakhage is no longer alive, it is not possible to receive such accounts of the direct experience behind films which do not so closely depict a specific subjective experience. The phenomenological inspiration behind such works is lost.

### **Themes across the hand-painted collection**

Whilst such detailed primary sources are not available for all the works in the second stage collection, there are other sources that offer insights into the direct experience behind the hand-painted films. One source that is available for all of the works is each film's synopsis. Most of these were written by Brakhage, demonstrating his interest in praxis (uniting, thinking and doing). A select few were not written by the artist himself but were chosen by Brakhage to represent or reflect the film, and are therefore just as significant. Through an examination of these synopses, it is possible to highlight a number of reoccurring phenomenological themes and intentions that identify areas of similarity across the collection. These include: *Being in the Physical World*, *The Creative and Sublime*, *Modes of Seeing*, *The Representational* and *The Abstract*. These themes offer valuable insights into what Brakhage publicly acknowledged about each film whilst offering further depth to the artist's understanding of each work. They are by no means definitive, many of the works reference more than one theme (in these instances I have highlighted the most dominant theme). Additionally, many film synopses focus heavily on the physical construction and make-up of the film, such as the techniques and materials used, more so than the experience itself. Whilst this is, in itself, telling, by looking for similarities across the synopses, these themes attempt to go beyond the production details of the works and explore Brakhage's window into his direct and lived experiences<sup>8</sup>. The descriptions below include key quotations and references to a number of pure hand-painted films, all taken from the official film synopses from 'The Film-Maker's

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<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise stated, references to Brakhage's hand-painted works regarding the themes of the second-stage collection relate to the pure hand-painted films.

Coop' website (<http://film-makerscoop.com/>). A full list of the appropriate theme for each hand-painted work, including film synopsis, can be found in Appendix Two: *Themes of the hand-painted collection*.

### *Being in the Physical World*

Considering the significance of phenomenology to Brakhage's works, it may seem strange that not all of the hand-painted works fit into this theme. As Brakhage himself wrote, "Nowhere in its mechanical process does the camera hold either mirror or candle to nature" (1963, p. 126). However, some works draw significant attention to aspects of experiencing the physical environment around us. Three films within this theme explore a synthetic or social experience of being in the world. *The Fur of Home* (1996), *Lovesong* (2001) and *Lovesong 2* (2001) are irrefutably tied up with being human and the human environment. *The Fur of Home* is a study in a man-made object, discussed as 'reminiscent' of a grey rug. *Lovesong* and *Lovesong 2* are focused on the act of lovemaking, renewing a concurrent theme throughout Brakhage's camera works (including *Loving* [1956], *Wedlock House: An Intercourse* [1959] and *Sexual Meditation* [1970]). They differ from the first stage films by their focus on the sexual act through hypnagogic vision, resulting in "glyphic representations of body-parts" (<http://film-makerscoop.com/catalogue/stan-brakhage-lovesong> ).

Most of the works within this theme, however, offer a specific focus on nature and the physical world, devoid of man-made society. This is a theme continued from the first-stage works, demonstrating Brakhage's interest in the natural world around him throughout his life. The existence of the theme of nature emphasises the abundance of natural stimuli in Brakhage's life, and reflects closely Glenn Parson's belief that "[N]atural things, such as insects and plants, and natural events, such as the fall of rain and the mating behaviours of birds, are all around us, even in the midst of civilization's great cities" (2008, p. 3). Whilst the theme of nature connects them, Brakhage's descriptions of these works are far from narrative or representational in content. Their treatment of nature differs across the works: *Earthen Aerie* (1995) adopts a broad and yet abstract connection to the physical environment, exploring "flecked earth and rock shapes and root-like forms which seem to suck horizontally inward and upward midst phosphorescent greens and blues increasingly flecked with light-yellows giving way to tree-top branch likenesses taking oblique shape against a phosphor sky". Works such as *The Earth Song of the Cricket* (1999) concern a more specific element of nature, such as 'insect-like movements' that depict 'the electric hind legs of the cricket'. Both accentuate the presence of movement and of moving through the world.



However, across the 'nature' works, these descriptions are intertwined with vocabulary that emphasises Brakhage's openness to contrasting interpretation. He rejects a dominant authorial perspective, using phrases including 'appear as' and 'to suggest' that simultaneously welcomes the abstract, or non-representational, elements of the images. Brakhage tackles this, and the representation of language through titles, in his synopses for *The Lion and the Zebra Make God's Raw Jewels* (1999). This synopsis concludes the film is "a collection of mostly un-nameable shapes which gather round this recognizable iconography and visually dominate the image".

*Blossom Gift/Favor* (1993) highlights the phenomenological experience and presence of the artist (as experiencer) within the description itself. He writes, "it [the work] would seek some visual corollary of the whole growth process (root, stem, leaves, blue sky and the bloody-gold growth of the meat/mind electricity of the filmmaker)". This epitomises the embodiment of man in the world experiencing the world around him and, through the impact of such experiencing, recognising the change in himself through the process. The secluded relationship expressed between man and nature, in isolation of other people, is also deeply phenomenological. It resonates with the absence of man-made influences that Merleau-Ponty praised within the paintings of Paul Cezanne, focusing on a 'pure' portrayal of nature, untouched by society and which "forbids all human effusiveness" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, P. 5). It is therefore not surprising that the theme of nature exists within the hand-painted collection considering, as Merleau-Ponty explains, "Everything comes to us from nature; we exist through it; nothing else is worth remembering." (1945, p. 3).

### *The Creative and Sublime*

The theme of *the creative and sublime* is a small yet significant category within the hand-painted films. It acts as an intensified development of the previous theme of being in the world, revolving around elements of our world that we cannot come into contact with<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> My categorisation of the sublime has occurred as a result of a broad understanding of the term. In tracing the synopses of Brakhage's works, the exploration of unexperienceable subject matters (as discussed in this category) was a clear similarity in the works detailed. The term 'sublime' was chosen as the most appropriate vocabulary available to define this similarity. However, it is important to recognise the substantial academic heritage of the sublime, as analysed by a number of philosophers and aestheticians, including Immanuel Kant and Jean-Francois Lyotard, to name a few. Their key texts in this field could further develop and question my treatment and consideration of the sublime. For example, Kant's understanding defined in *The Critique of Judgement* highlights the role of subjective experience in the construct of the sublime, in contrast to objectively defining something in nature as sublime. He wrote, "[T]he sublime, in the strict sense of the word, cannot be contained

Therefore, Brakhage does not have direct lived experience of the actual subject-matter. Instead, these works suggest Brakhage's broad interest in aspects of the world and our universe that cannot benefit from a concrete, phenomenological exploration. That doesn't stop Brakhage's romantic, personal and subjective examination of these aspects. This theme mirrors the previous in that it is once again divided into the natural and the human. Two of the works express a sense of nature, but on a much greater scale than the previous category. Both *Stellar* (1993) and *Cloud Chamber* (1999) suggest the sublime, offering "a different, unusual or extraordinary encounter with nature" (Lippai, 2009, p. 76). These works could perhaps be considered a progression of Brakhage's phenomenological experience of being as they attempt to tackle the limitations of our experience, exerting "a pull on our imagination, showing how great the world can be" (Cochrane, 2012, p. 138). *Stellar* achieves this through the use of dark blue images that 'suggest galactic forms in a space of stars'. However, it is *Cloud Chamber* which offers a detailed synopsis of the sublime within the work. Using a quote from Courtney Hoskins, who Brakhage studied with at the University of Colorado, the description offers the perception of an audience member that could be assumed, for Brakhage, to exemplify the sublime experience he aimed to capture. Hoskins writes;

When a hailstone forms, it makes a vertical voyage through a cloud; heavy updraft winds keep it aloft while downdrafts force it to fall. As the hailstone falls, its outer layer melts, shifts and then re-freezes in a complex formation when it rises. You can determine the number of trips a hailstone has made through a cloud by counting the number of rings that have formed around its center. Eventually, the aggregate becomes too heavy and falls as a singular ball of ice. In CLOUD CHAMBER, I felt that I saw what I might have seen, had I been at the nucleus of such a hailstone, collecting the colors of the cloud while making a circular voyage and finally falling at the saturation point - the heavy colors at the end of the film. The illustrations on the front are evidence of this collection of diverse colors on a hailstone, due to the obvious existence of such colors (in some form or another) in the clouds that generate them!

Within this work, and this description, Brakhage challenges the limitations of phenomenology itself: whilst phenomenology aims to remind us of the difference between scientific knowledge and experiencing the thing itself, the use of Hoskins' quote embodies the two. Within the work, Brakhage takes a process that we understand through scientific

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in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation. Thus the broad ocean agitated by storms cannot be called sublime" (Kant, 2001, p. 52).

knowledge, and attempts to experience that un-experienceable process. He offers an imaginative phenomenological reading that enhances a sense of wonder and intrigue into the sublime processes generally regarded as too great for us to experience ourselves.

The final film within this theme returns once again to Brakhage's interest in love-making. However, in contrast to the *Lovesong* works, *Coupling* (1999) goes beyond the act itself to *imagine* 'the sex act affecting internal organs of the human bodies'. Whilst it also exemplifies hypnagogic vision, its focus on the imaginative experience of the internal body when having sex, has resulted in its placement within this theme. Both divergent ways of treating imagined experience (the natural and the social) show Brakhage's commitment towards experience and, at the same time, his dedication to challenging its limitations. Even though Brakhage is unable to directly experience the subject-matter for these works, by attempting to, he draws attention to the processes themselves and the emotional possibilities of such worldly experiences.

### *Modes of Seeing*

The term *modes of seeing* is borrowed from Suranjan Ganguly's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday interview with Brakhage and is a useful term to encompass Brakhage's many visual methodologies. For the hand-painted collection, this mostly revolves around the artist's concept of hypnagogic vision and moving visual thinking. These methodologies are relevant to most, if not all, of the hand-painted works; Brakhage adopted the painted style in order to realise these visual methodologies. However, for the films grouped within this category, Brakhage personally reminds the reader of their significance through his film synopses. In *Aftermath* (1981), an extended hand-painted film, a film attacking pop culture, Brakhage describes moving visual thinking himself as "the very raw meat of brain, trying to absorb and transform the unthinkable". Exploring the works within this theme highlights the breadth of subjects that hypnagogic vision can capture and explore. They range from emotions (*Night Music in Three Hand-Painted Films* [1990]), to cities and other real locations, and, even broader, to capturing a general sense of the every-day life (*Boulder Blues and Pearls and...* [1992]). Some are inspired by real places Brakhage lived (*Preludes 7-12 in Preludes 1-24* [1995-1996]), by love and religion (*Untitled (For Marilyn)* [1992]), whilst others are a result of "the hypnagogic after-effect of a psychological cathexis as designated by Freud". There are also interdisciplinary

examples emphasising Brakhage's inspirations from music and painting (*Divertimento* [1996] and *Preludes 7-12* again<sup>10</sup>).

The range of life experiences expressed through the hand-painted process shows the significance and success of the visual methodologies for Brakhage, which spans over two decades. Ironically, despite these works being based on something as personal as the artist's own thought processes, and regardless of how frequently Brakhage discussed these modes of seeing, the descriptions of these works accentuate how private and unknown Brakhage's actual experience is. The description for *Night Music* (in *Three Hand-Painted Films* [1990]) is possibly the closest Brakhage comes in his endeavour to depict his modes of seeing through language, encapsulating his experience of sadness as "colors and forms coursing, flowing, bursting, as if on fire and water- of the earth, of the body, of the mind". As already discussed, the presence of colour, nature and movement is particularly significant; the lyrical and poetic style of the description, fragmented in form, echo the fast-paced and energetic visuals. In contrast, most other works within this category place less emphasis on attempting to verbalise the process, reinforcing Brakhage's belief that with film, he can achieve something he could not with language.

### *The Representational*

This category seems like an unlikely reoccurring theme within the hand-painted works, taking into account the non-photographic nature of the hand-painting process. However, once explored in greater detail, this theme offers a different interpretation of *the representational* than that often explored in Brakhage's first-stage works. This theme, too, can be divided into separate strands: the dramatic and the cultural.

The dramatic consists of four hand-painted works. Their descriptions offer the closest portrayal to a sense of plot, revolving around the dramatic. They stand out from the other hand-painted works through their narrative tone, in contrast to Brakhage's romantic and personal phenomenological perspective. *Dark Tower* (1999) and *Stately Mansions Did Decree* (1999) explore a similar strand of imagery; a sense of the historic and romantic can be traced through the language used. The former read like stage directions, outlining "a battle of

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<sup>10</sup>The *Preludes* collection is difficult to place due to the depth of discussion Brakhage includes on the different section- in this case *Preludes 7-12*, giving each part a sense of its own identity. However, as can be seen in Appendix Two: *Themes of the hand-painted collection*, Brakhage confirms within his description that these films will only ever be shown 'in this form under this title.' As a result, I have located this group of *Preludes* together under the theme of modes of seeing, as the category they are best-placed.

knights, their lances, horses, et al” that take place below “the tapered shape of a tower, a silhouette as it were against the backdrop of the flaring sky”. The latter continues this medieval imagery; Brakhage’s description starts dramatically with “torn fragments of thick parchment erupting upward” before a tour of gardens, mansions, castles and rooms ensues. *Paranoia Corridor* (1995) offers much less in terms of story; the description states the images “suggest, rather than delineate, passage through a corridor”. The term ‘suggests’ indicates Brakhage chose not to objectively define his images. The artist’s next brief sentence heightens the sense of dramatic tension as the “menacing evolution of patterns” develop before reaching their resolution. The final work within this section is *Rounds* (2001). It shares a similar authorial stance to *Paranoia Corridor*, particularly in terms of its dramatic content. Brakhage writes, “The colored abstract forms seem as if figures at a carnival and/or sometimes as if ‘on stage’: thus their actions are, then, particularly theatrical.” Later within the synopsis, Brakhage reflects that these shapes are truly just paint which recognise “the dramatics of the Abstract Expressionist movement”. Whilst most of these works are very different in terms of what they represent, the presence of the dramatic, and the suggestion of narrative within the works makes this theme more reminiscent of Brakhage’s camera works. However, the artist’s treatment of the narrative- suggestions and possibilities rather than film narratives with characters- offers a new interpretation. The continuous presence of technical descriptions, and the significant phrases focused on colours, offer continuous reminders of the painterly, always drawing us back to the materiality of the works and their overall position within the hand-painted collection.

In contrast to the dramatic, the second group within the representational is based around the ‘cultural’ and includes some of Brakhage’s most discussed works. I have chosen the term cultural to capture the range of ‘humanist’ topics these works have developed from, including inspirations surrounding the literary, philosophical, historical, artistic and the architectural. The majority of the works are grounded in Brakhage’s thought processes on more immaterial experiences, such as theories or other artworks that are meaningful to him, in contrast to the emphasis on the physical experience of moving through the world which I have previously explored. Generally, these works offer more exposition on the stimulus behind the work, giving us a valuable insight into Brakhage’s personal interests and perspectives. They also highlight Brakhage’s interdisciplinary interests, not just as an artist but as a spectator, and his thirst for knowledge across a wide range of subject areas. *Hell Spit Flexion* (1983) is widely known as the hand-painted section of *The Dante Quartet* (1987). However, in its individual synopsis, it is not Dante but William Blake’s ‘The Marriage of

Heaven and Hell' that is referenced, "inspired by memories of an old man coughing in the night of a thin-walled ancient hotel". Turning to the philosophical, *Occam's Thread* (2001) offers an alternative representation of The Razor's Edge, "more thread-like: a staggered black line, growing steadily more solid, albeit often tangled trails vertically across the film surface, insinuating itself (its life as it were)"; whilst *Nodes* (1981), reflects "concepts given me by Sigmund Freud" in his text, *Interpretation of Dreams*.

The significance of the other arts to Brakhage is emphasised by the number of works made in homage to artists in other media: *Ephemeral Solidity* (1993) makes reference to Austrian composer Joseph Haydn (the work summarized by Brakhage as a "haydnesque complexity of thematic variations"). *The Thatch of Night* (1990) produces "a warp and woof of emblematic visions" that are homage to Marie Menken's *Notebooks*, whilst *Water for Maya* (2000) acts as a tribute to Maya Deren and her love of water. The next two works were built specifically for a collaboration; *Three Homerics* (1993), a set of three films, "to accompany a piece of music on a Homeric poem," whilst *Fireloop*, as part of the extended hand-painted *Caswallon Trilogy* (1986), contributed towards "Jane Brakhage's story of Caesar's invasion of Britain". *In Consideration of Pompeii* (1995) exemplifies Brakhage's personal experience of learning about the historic event. The synopsis acts as a more factual and descriptive explanation of the existence of the work, rather than the work itself. The artist documents the different ways in which the event 'haunted' him, from photographs sold as pornography at his school to the more professional accounts of David Sutherland and Brakhage's own first-hand experience of the ruins through photographs. The different points of contact with various elements of the event offer an interesting study into Brakhage's embodied experience of learning about the catastrophe. The final artwork of this theme, and arguably the most well-known within this section, is *Chartres Series* (1994). This work stands out as it is based on a more physical experience of being in Chartres Cathedral, followed up with many years of studying "its great stained-glass windows, sculpture and architecture". The experience is also affected by a number of people including the author, Henry Adams, and the filmmaker's Nick Dorsky and Jean-Michele Bouhours. Sam Bush, Brakhage's optical printer at Western Cine, is also given a special reference, different to that included at the end of many of the works themselves; described as a composer handing a 'medieval manuscript' to the musician.

Reflecting on all the works within the 'cultural' section, the impacts of my theme of representation are many and varied. On a wider scale it draws attention to the great range of experiences that can be explored, highlighting the internal analysis and thought that the

artist spent reflecting on significant interests and inspirations in his life. It also lays much-needed emphasis away from the more natural experiences that monopolise other themes, and towards man-made stimuli, in order to truly recognise the extent to which Brakhage was embedded within a wide range of cultural areas. The result of this is to once again reiterate Brakhage's broad analysis of experience and the many ways in which he embraced phenomenological investigation.

### *The Abstract*

This final theme, which I have titled *the abstract*, is integral to the make-up of the hand-painted collection. Whilst only the dominant abstract works have been placed under this theme, the elements that make up its identity can be found across all of the second stage works and are key to what make these works distinctive. These elements include an emphasis on colour patterns/ movements within the frames, non-descriptive titles, brief and vague descriptions, a rejection of linguistic representation. These elements contrast with much conventional art, the impact of them can be most easily summarised as abstract. They offer little objective recognition or focus in relation to story or meaning. Interestingly, the length of descriptions within this category vary greatly. Those for works such as *Skein* (1974) and *The 'b' Series* (1995) are particularly short; *Skein* intimating the significance of material, experience, visual thinking, light and even a sense of narrative in a few short sentences: "[A] loosely coiled length of yarn (story)... wound on a reel- my parenthesis! This is a painted film (inspired by unpainted pictures): 'skins' of paint hung in a weave of light". In contrast, *The 'b' Series* is merely factual in its description, written by Fred Camper, documenting the named parts that make up the work. No further information is provided on the works themselves or Brakhage's experience behind their existence. In a similar vein, many of Brakhage's synopses reiterate the films' resistance to verbal language outside of the title: in *I Take These Truths* (1994) he wrote, "everything beyond the title is as far removed from language as I could possibly make it; and thus it is, to me, practically impossible to describe"; whilst *Study in Color and Black and White* (1993) starts, "The title is almost the whole of any possible description". Colour also plays a defining part in most of the works in this theme, with the progression of colours described in visual phrases; "Red, blue and yellow course through in an up-down motion, then blues and yellows enter from left and right in a complex medley of not solidly formed, but very vibrant, pulsations of color".<sup>11</sup> In other works, Brakhage focuses on the patterns and shapes created by either the paint -creating 'extremely

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<sup>11</sup> The synopsis for this film was written by Marilyn Brakhage.

thin-lined colors and sharply delineated shapes which are constantly interrupted by 'cloud'-like forms' (*Preludes 1-6* [1996]), or his tools-where sections are 'fuzzily dotted with blurred whites and criss-crossed by black brushstrokes' (*Beautiful Funerals* [1996]). In addition to the colours themselves, Brakhage also develops a sense of narrative, not of language or representation, but purely based on colour. At times he discusses these colour patterns as 'themes' that "finally give way to clear thick gelatinous effects which resolve themselves in a long passage of beseechingly-struggling hieroglyphic white shapes" (*I Take These Truths* [1994]). Elsewhere, Brakhage develops a sense of structure through an "interplay [that] continues until the latter imagery begins to dominate with increasing reoccurrence [...], leading to a 'stately and emphatic end'" (*Cricket Requiem* [1999]).

The works connected to this final theme have a complex relationship with phenomenology. This chapter has advocated the phenomenological belief that an individual cannot exist without locating their lived experience as a direct result of their surroundings. The materiality of the physical world is the setting for all of our thoughts, feelings and memories, we cannot be separated from it. Therefore, despite this abstract title, the hand-painted works cannot be abstract when considered from the artist's perspective. The stimulus and inspiration behind the works resulted from his lived experience and impacted his perspectives on vision and experience, many of which are clarified through his visual methodologies. It is therefore unsurprising that the term 'abstract' was considered highly problematic, and mostly in a negative fashion, by Brakhage. He demonstrated a strong dislike of the word on many occasions. Instead, he argued that his works held concrete meaning. For Brakhage, the images directly related to his concrete living experience, including experiences and memories based in the material world. Even if sensory thought and knowledge was not representational in a clear and obvious way, if it related to Brakhage's lived experience it was concrete. He stated, in a letter to Malcolm Goldstein, "Thinking about the word abstract in your letter: 'free of narrative associations' / 'premised upon thought process, intrinsic physiology, felt' as you say and I agree- I would say this is the most concrete of all art" (Brakhage, S to Goldstein, M, November 21, 1982). Following this argument, Brakhage's renowned distrust of abstraction can be understood. His works were highly meaningful, based on personal and private knowledge and sensory experiences that were infinitely tied to his being-in-the-world. Any reference to abstraction within the works, for Brakhage, overlooks this meaningful connection to lived experience. The result of this is to distance the works from both Brakhage's own visual methodologies and a significant aim of avant-garde film within this era- to explore vision through



the possibilities of film. Ignoring the concrete phenomenological focus of his work overlooks the significance of the direct experience to the production method. This thesis therefore supports Brakhage's perspective that the hand-painted films cannot be considered abstract in relation to *the artist's experience* or production method. Instead, they are highly phenomenological and, therefore, meaningful.

However, the title of this theme, *the abstract*, reflects a significant step back by the artist from discussing the impact of, and inspiration from, direct experience that developed throughout the creation of the second-stage collection. As the synopses demonstrate, Brakhage provides a crucial lack of information on his lived experience surrounding these works. This limits the connection between the hand-painted images and concrete lived experience for all parties outside of the artist himself, as it purposely moves away references to either lived experience or the material world. Without such insight, the concrete and objective connection to elements of lived experience is unavailable. Therefore, whilst this study supports Brakhage's view on abstraction in relation to *his* production experience, it does not rule out the relevance of abstraction outside of this authorial framing. This argument is continued in Chapter Three (see p83).

### **The Creative Experience**

The creative experience explores Brakhage's production experience of the hand-painted films. The avant-garde has typically focused significantly on this process, to explore the ways in which artists have explored and expanded the artistic and visual possibilities of the film medium. However, to return to John Dewey, a crucial area of study is the relationship between the direct and creative experience. This explores the way(s) in which direct, lived experience impacts or relates to the art product created through the creative experience. Therefore, the role of the creative experience is two-fold: literally speaking it must consider the physical process of creating the artwork; but to bridge Dewey's gap between the esthetic and the artistic, it must go beyond this to explore the way in which lived experience is transferred to an artwork. The creative experience must embody the process of the individual channelling that which is given through lived experience and used to create art.

### *The Production Method*

I will firstly explore the hand-painted production method, which changed significantly from Brakhage's first stage collection and from the conventional approach to filming within the

avant-garde. Due to the discarded role of the camera, Brakhage's films were not produced by filming images, but by painting them directly onto film celluloid, making his production method closely akin to the medium of painting. Unlike traditional painters, Brakhage's celluloid canvas was infinitely smaller, a 16mm film would have been "less than three-tenths of an inch high" (Camper, 1999, p. 45). Whilst brushes and other equipment were regularly used, Brakhage continued to use his own body directly within the production process. Where his arms were particularly significant in the lyrical filmmaking-mode (see p19), the artist's fingers became a primary tool in applying paint directly to the celluloid. This continued the direct connection between Brakhage's body and his art that had dominated his art-making since the 1950s, increasing it to have more direct impact on the core materiality of the film. This resulted, as Brakhage wrote, in the creation of "truly, finally, a hand-painted film" (Brakhage, S to F. Camper, July 16, 1984). Whilst increasing his physical intimacy with his artworks, the hand-painted technique also distanced the presence of the filmmaker from the image. He was no longer felt as the unseen figure behind the camera and the images do not provide such a concrete depiction of his vision due to the lack of photographic representation. Therefore, the hand-painted works simultaneously developed a more direct private and personal experience of production for Brakhage as artist, whilst distancing his felt presence for audiences.

The lack of photographic representation is crucial to the theme of abstraction within the collection, as discussed. However, Brakhage's visual aesthetic within the hand-painted works also emphasised the abstract qualities. The images created on the celluloid are not concrete, representational, geometric or even nameable shapes. Neither are they animated or cartoon-like in their aesthetic. Instead, Brakhage's hand-painted strips could be better described as glazed blends and fragments of colour. The result is organic, a compound of different tones and mixtures of colours. Each individual frame of a hand-painted image is intricate and detailed, demonstrating Brakhage's commitment to the painting method. In a letter to Caroline Avery, a fellow hand-painter of film, he demonstrates this commitment:

I must confess that I was leery of looking at your films, because most people who paint-on-film tend to just slosh stripes from end-to-end, wiggling them a little into diagonals along the way somesuch and/or proclaim themselves 'chance operation' buffs simply and ONLY to avoid the tedious work of painting frame-to-frame soforth; thus you can imagine how delighted I was really watching an ART of hand-painted film...(Brakhage, S to C. Avery, May 23, 1985).

This demonstrates the relevance of painting as an artform to Brakhage. Although a new and contrasting approach to creating film images for the artist, Brakhage dedicated time and energy into the painting process of the images. This evidences the significance of both paint as a medium and as a creative practice for the works, proving the pivotal role of painting to the artworks. Exploring individual frames of the second stage films demonstrates Brakhage's dedication to hand-painting film, creating elaborate and detailed aesthetics through paint. However, when viewing the films, these image race past, creating blurs and splinters of moving colour, resulting in a very different visual experience.

Unsurprisingly, there is a clear expectation that the production of the hand-painted films would involve the use of paint. For around two decades this was true, coal-tar based paint was a core ingredient for Brakhage's production process. However, the hand-painted films were not always painted with paint. The toxic nature of this ingredient was believed to play a part in Brakhage's bladder cancer diagnosis in 1997, Brakhage believed "literally the painting has poisoned me" (Still [Producer], 1996, *Brakhage on Brakhage 4*). As a result, Brakhage experimented with a range of non-paint materials to continue visually reproducing closed-eye vision on film (including acrylics, India dyes and magic markers) without further threatening his health. After Brakhage received the diagnosis, the use of coal-tar paint was also dropped because of the emotional impact it was having on the creative production process. As Camper explained, "He didn't want these emotions [of anger from the diagnosis] to interfere with the creative process, so he abjured all use of paint" (Camper, 1999, p. 45). Thus, the *process* of painting is of most significance to the second stage collection, the product of paint not always relevant.

The vital film material involved in the production process is the film celluloid, the base and canvas of the works. Both clear/ white and black leader was used in creating second stage works, creating very different visual aesthetics. Clear and white leader tends to emphasise the painterly quality of the works; the bright white background demonstrates the translucent nature of the paint, drawing attention to the specks, brushstrokes and cracks of the paint. They embody the organic and biological impact of paint on celluloid, often not unlike molecules moving under a microscope. This emphasises the existence, role and the liveness of paint, championing its significance in these works. Fewer hand-painted films are made solely or mostly with clear or white leader. *Water for Maya* (2000) can be identified as such, however I have not been able to identify any others that predominantly use white or clear leader. *Loud Visual Noises* (1986 and 1987) uses white leader although the artist paints it black at

many times. Black leader appears to have been Brakhage's preferred base for his hand-painted works. This added depth to the paint through its opaque aesthetic. The light of the projector emphasised the quality of the colours against the pitch-black abyss of the film celluloid. Brakhage regularly used this to build up tension and pace in the works, as the quantity of hand-paint in the images would rapidly increase, from few small dots of paint that flicker on and off, to a crescendo of colours, with an increasing quantity of the paint itself and more (and greater variety of) colours. Film made with black leader include *Night Music* (1990), *Rage Net* (1990), *Untitled (For Marilyn)* (1992), *Study in Color and Black and White* (1993) and *Paranoia Corridor* (1995), to name a small selection.

Unlike camera-works, which require the filmmaker to be at the setting, or subject, of their film (be this a landscape, area of the city or an area of the home), the hand-painted works provided Brakhage with flexibility. The ease in which the hand-painted materials could be carried around enabled the creative experience to be embedded so closely with lived experience- Brakhage could hand-paint whenever he felt the need or want to. As he explains in a filmed interview, *Brakhage on Brakhage*, "It's such a wonderful thing to be able to do, to be always carrying around the materials of your making at any moment, to be able to sit down with a little board and some film and some paints and inks or whatever, and be able to extend the work" (Still [Producer], 1996, *Brakhage on Brakhage* 4). Within this interview, we are also shown images of Brakhage painting in a Boulder café, the tools of his trade sitting on a one-person café table within the recognisable social setting.

#### *A phenomenological study of the creative experience*

The analysis above looks at one aspect of the creative experience, the production method. This description of method is, in itself, of great value to this study. It adds much-needed analysis on the hand-painted style itself and Brakhage's creative process. It is also significant in demonstrating crucial differences to the creative production of Brakhage's camera-made works (and most other avant-garde films). I will continue to analyse the impact of this in Chapters Three and Four.

However, I have argued for a multi-faceted understanding of the production experience, which must also concentrate on the phenomenological process of channelling stimuli and inspiration from first stage experience into art. Dewey recognises this as "the relationship between the objects of primary and of secondary or reflective experience" (1958, p. 5). This

reflective experience explores the practical act of exploring the meaning and knowledge received through lived experience. It is only through such reflective thought that direct experience becomes “a phenomenologically significant activity in its own right” (Parry, 2011, p. 1), as the sensory information received from the direct world is explored in a private and personal way. Again, Dewey summarizes this succinctly:

But just what role do the objects attained in reflection play? Where do they come in? They *explain* the primary objects, they enable us to grasp them with *understanding*, instead of just having sense-contact with them. But how? Well, they define or lay out a path by which return to experienced things is of such a sort that the meaning, the significant content, of what is experienced gains an enriched and expanded force because of the path or method by which it was reached. Directly, in immediate contact it may be just what it was before- hard, colored, odorous, etc. But when the secondary objects, the refined objects, are employed as a method or road for coming at them, these qualities cease to be isolated details; they get the meaning contained in a whole system of related objects (1958, p.5).

Reflection therefore underscores the significance of the creative experience, where time and space is set aside for considering the subjective impact of particular memories, moments or simply previous contact with the material world. Merleau-Ponty discusses this from a phenomenological standpoint, observing the proactive and creative *act* of reflection in its own right. He wrote, “When I begin to reflect my reflection bears upon an unreflective experience; moreover my reflection cannot be unaware of itself as an event, and so it appears to itself in the light of a truly creative act” (2002, p. xi). This act of reflection heightens the art production of a hand-painted film. It demonstrates a significant difference between the direct and creative stage; the direct experience is lived experience that does not involve reflection within the live moment, whilst the creative experience centres around this act of reflection. The creative experience ultimately furthers the artist’s own meaningful understanding and interpretation of living in the world. As a result of this reflection on direct experience, the artist gives birth to a completely new creative experience through the creation of the artwork. Brakhage’s lived experience is therefore the reason for the existence of his art, including his hand-painted films. But the artwork also moves beyond this, channelling the direct experience into something more than it was before. Both the direct experience and the creative art product exist in their own right. In other words, it is not pre-existing truth that Brakhage uncovers through the creative experience of his hand-painted works, but “the act of bringing truth into being” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. xxiii).

The birth of the new artwork extends Dewey and Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the reflective act. The visible, direct art product demonstrates the practical outcome of this reflective act, drawing the process into the realm of reflexivity. Whilst reflection suggests an active mental

state, reflexivity indicates the direct action that has come into existence through the act of reflection. As Mary Ryan explains, “[B]y moving into a process of reflexivity, we can use the reflective thought as a catalyst for action, so beginning a continuous cycle of reflective deliberation, action and effect” (2014, p. 8). As the existence of Brakhage’s visual methodologies demonstrates, this reflective deliberation (of direct experience) is transferred through reflexive action and effect into the hand-painted films, embodying his overarching inspiration of closed-eye vision. The number of hand-painted works demonstrates the continuation of this reflective and reflexive cycle, with further hand-painted works being created and extending Brakhage’s interest and focus on this aspect of vision and perception. The result of this, as Merleau-Ponty explained, “by lending his body to the world [...] the artist changes the world into paintings (1964, p. 162). The artworks evidence the experience and the change that has taken place for Brakhage.

Brakhage’s visual methodologies for the hand-painted works evidences the reflective and reflexive actions within the wider creative experience. His earlier description of the lived experience behind *Black Ice* demonstrated Brakhage’s thought-process, both of reflecting on the direct experience and in channelling that experience and the long-term implications it had into art. His commitment to “keep[ing] the connection to the trauma very clear so that I’m [...] really being true to the feelings that have engendered the film” (Brakhage, Hoffman, 1995/ 1996, p. 14) show the presence of the reflection of the lived experience throughout the creative process. For Brakhage, the reflexive act could also be felt after the completion of the artwork. In relation to one of his camera-works (*Oh Life- A Woe Story- The Test News* [1963]), he explained, “And then as I come to view it, I come to see some of these things begin to emerge in my clarities in my speaking” (Camhi, 1979 p. 121). This indicates that the creative process, a non-verbal art process, has supported Brakhage’s understanding of, and learning from, the original lived experience. By reflexively considering lived experience through the process of art-making, Brakhage has been able to improve his vocal depiction of the experience and its impact.

### **Considering Brakhage as an auteur**

This chapter has traced elements of Brakhage’s production experience that the artist has shared publicly or has been made available after his death. It has therefore explored the authorial meaning behind the artworks, traced through Brakhage’s direct lived experience and the ways in which he channelled such knowledge into art. Such analysis, I have demonstrated, provides a key insight into the inspiration behind the works and the ways in which

the works were made. This is vital in understanding Brakhage's own experience of the second-stage works as best as possible. Both Brakhage's direct and creative experience linked to the hand-painted works are highly subjective, unique to Brakhage's outlook and perceptions of the world, and the ways in which he has engaged with the materiality of his surroundings. They uncover very personal meanings, experiences and memories for the artist. These personal meanings have long been the focus of film reception in the avant-garde. The artist's explanations and meanings surrounding his artworks have played a central role in how the works have been understood and, as I have argued, Brakhage's own discussion was highly sought after whilst he was alive.

The significance of Brakhage's production experience therefore questions the level of intervention and control he had over the meaning of his artworks. This, inevitably, leads to the wider philosophical implications of his authorship. As is widely known, auteur theory, born out of French film criticism of the 1950s, celebrates the achievements of the filmmaker as author, in a similar fashion to the writer of the literary novel. Across film, the director is most widely connected to the role of the author, they "display[ed] a consistency of theme and style [in their works] which [...] could be ascribed to the force of the director's personality and unique obsessions" (2001, p. 10). However, auteur theory has most often been applied within the context of commercial and Hollywood film. This offers a very different filmic context for authorship in comparison to the avant-garde. The large scale of Hollywood films resulted in multiple different staff roles and creative visions being involved in the film product. Directors, script writers, producers, designers, camera-men and women, editors etc., all have an impact on the final film, rendering commercial film a collective achievement. This is an important challenge to authorship. A popular example of this view is demonstrated by Pauline Kael in her deconstruction of Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941). For Kael, "*Citizen Kane* is not a great work that suddenly burst out of a young prodigy's head [...], it is a superb example of collaboration" (1971, p. 75).

In contrast, the avant-garde has championed an artist's individual exploration through film. Artists have widely worked alone on a much smaller scale than commercial film, with much greater control over their artistic choices and the aesthetic of the final product. As James Peterson reflected, "Avant-garde filmmakers generally shoot and edit their own films; quite often they perform in them as well. And historically at least, avant-garde filmmakers have financed their films out of their own pockets" (1994, p. 31). This is particularly true of artists working in the romantic and modernist phase of the avant-garde, including Brakhage, who

made themselves the focus of their artistic study. Their works explored their own individual expressions and perceptions through film. They demonstrated a much greater sense of freedom over the content and style of their work due to the personal and subjective motivations that films were born out of, which were free from studio pressures and constraints. As Nicole Brenez and Adrian Martin explore, this authorial approach to avant-garde film was a critical element that artists later rejected, as “Brakhage’s films and his authorial aura were targeted, post-60s, by successive waves of the radical avant-garde” (‘Serious Mothlight’, 2003). Thus, auteur theory within the avant-garde is most strongly linked to this historic style within the wider movement.

Despite the strong connection between auteur theory and the romantic and modernist avant-garde, there has been a general absence of academic discussion across the entire movement. Whilst auteur theory has been effective “in revealing certain subtleties of the narrative film, [it] has excluded the avant-garde film” (*A history of the...*, 1976, p. 24). This is particularly strange as auteur theory shared avant-garde film’s key priority, to understand film as an art form in itself, breaking through the literary constraints of narrative in order to recognise film as an artistic medium in its own right. William E.B. Verron highlighted that “maybe it is appropriate to call avant-garde filmmakers true auteurs: they are the ones who most often ‘author’ their film texts, create a specific and individualized mis-en-scene, and address personal concerns” (2012, p. 48). This is perhaps most true of the romantic and modernist avant-garde filmmakers, who also escaped other pressures that artists outside of this style of avant-garde film may have faced. They were not hostage to intellectual theories and thought-processes that were fashionable and significant at other stages of the wider avant-garde movement. Additionally, the romantic nature of such work coming out of the 1950s and 1960s championed the high, and perhaps mystical, reverence placed on an artist through auteur analysis. In *Film Authorship Auteurs and Other Myths*, Paul Sellors discusses Andrew Bennett’s examination of the Romantic author as “both an exemplary human and somehow above or beyond the human, as literally and figuratively outstanding” (2010, p. 11). This demonstrates the romantic nature of authorship as a concept in itself. For this reason, the decline of romantic, modernist avant-garde film reflected Roland Barthes’ seminal views surrounding the death of the author:

[W]riting is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing [...] this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death (Image, Music, Text, 1977).



The notion of the death of the author, in Brakhage's case, shifts focus from the views of production to the views of reception in relation to the audience. This will be the core focus of the second half of my thesis (Chapters Four, Five and Six).

### *The complications of Brakhage as auteur*

Through his pivotal role within the romantic and modernist style of avant-garde film, Brakhage can be considered an auteur in many ways. His working practices, across his career, echo the solitary and independent journey of the artist. This led J. Hoberman to label Brakhage a "gregarious loner" ('A Modern Hero' March 18 2003) and resulted in David James labelling Brakhage's works as "fundamentally an individual achievement, unlike previous developments in the avant-garde, which had been collective" (2005, p. 10). Brakhage was also vehemently committed to the vision of avant-garde film as an art-form. He verbally demonstrated his frustration with the lack of aesthetic exploration in Hollywood cinema, which led him to state, "I never in the world saw a Hollywood film that needed more than coffee table exposition after the movie chit chat" (Still [Producer], 1996, *Brakhage on Brakhage 2*). Brakhage's development of the hand-painted style strengthens his auteur status further. His body directly created the images, without the need of the camera as facilitator. His physical touch within each frame embeds the author deep into the images, neatly fitting the definition of 'direct film' as "the only form of filmmaking that *literally* fits the auteur theory as the touch of the artist is physically present in every frame." (Gerstner and Staiger, 2003, p. 176). In addition to his physical presence, the reflexive nature of his films led Brakhage to explain that his images "powerfully include the emotions of the maker, as *literal maker*" ('Stan Brakhage- Biography', [n.d.] Box 55, Folder 7). This, once again, confirms the significance of Brakhage's thoughts and emotions to the creative experience. Even within the editing process he would take "this material and according to what's driven me to make it in the first place, to get the envisionment of it- some paradigm of what I'm really feeling and seeing- I make this film." (Brakhage, Hoffman, 1995/ 1996, p. 14). Through these arguments, it is easy to understand Verrone's opinion that it is "hard to argue that someone like Stan Brakhage is not an auteur" (2012, p. 48).

However, Brakhage's authorial status is still complex. Auteur theory is woolly when it comes to considering the ways in which the filmmaking process is collaborative. Whilst Brakhage's production process is infinitely more independent than Hollywood film, Brakhage's career did include collaborative elements. Firstly, Brakhage himself highlighted the role of Jane (his

first wife) and his family in creating his earlier first-stage films. Perhaps in answer to the growing awareness of feminism in the avant-garde in the mid-twentieth century, Brakhage clarified that Jane was not simply the objects of his films. He explained:

‘By Brakhage’ should be understood to mean ‘by the way of Stan and Jane Brakhage,’ as it does in all my films since marriage. It is coming to mean: ‘by way of Stan and Jane and all the children Brakhage’ because all the discoveries which used to pass only thru the instrument of myself are coming to pass thru the sensibilities of those I love.... Ultimately ‘by Brakhage’ will come to be superfluous and understood as what it now ultimately is: by way of everything. (James, 1989, p. 38).

In addition, Brakhage’s oeuvre also contains a small number of physically collaborative works. Despite his status as a ‘gregarious loner’, Brakhage was a central part of the avant-garde community and communicated with other artists across film and other media very regularly. Physical film collaborations included, most extensively, his projects with fellow film-maker and Colorado University lecturer, Phil Solomon. In total they produced three films together, *Elementary Phrases* (1994), *Concrescence* (1996) and *Seasons...* (2002). All three included images hand-painted by Brakhage with Solomon collaborating on the step-printing and editing process.

Similarly, Sam Bush collaborated with Brakhage on the editing process. As mentioned previously, Sam Bush worked at Western Cine and was Brakhage’s optical printer for many of his works (until Bush was let go due to the lack of demand of their services, reflecting the technical changes of film towards digital means). Continuing the production experience, once Brakhage had created the hand-painted images, he would send these across to Western Cine for printing, which would enable the images to be run through a projector. Bush’s creative role in the production process did impact the aesthetic of the final product. Brakhage documented their working relationship as open and creative, explaining, “I send elaborate instructions but our understanding is he is free to extemporize within those final instructions” (Brakhage, Hoffman, 1995/ 1996, p. 13-14). Brakhage openly acknowledged this partnership in the final credits of the second stage works Bush was involved in. They read, ‘This film is to be considered a collaboration with Sam Bush, optical printer at Western Cine, in the sense that I was the composer, he the visual musician’. Thus, an extended aspect of the production process was collaborative and disrupted the isolated notion of Brakhage as sole creator.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> However, Brakhage did clarify that Bush’s involvement should not be seen as authorship. On a number of film synopses (such as *Beautiful Funerals*), Brakhage wrote, “Note: the credit to Sam Bush, Western Cine, is simply a homage to his creative craftsmanship. He is a paid employee of

The collaboration with Sam Bush also plays a key role in the potential existence of a final stage of experience. Following the direct and creative process, it could be argued that Brakhage also experienced a viewing experience, similar to that expected by the audience. This acknowledges the fundamental change that the art product goes through both at the optical printers and also, aesthetically, when it is run through a projector, after the images have been edited and looped together. These are the stages that enable movement and motion to be applied to the previously still painted images, which Brakhage is not directly part of. For the audience, this element of the creative process is not distinctive from Brakhage's mode of production. However, for Brakhage, it is only through the completion of all production stages, including those he does not control, that it is possible to view one of his works (in the way they are meant to be seen) for the first time. As John G. Hanhardt writes, "Brakhage as is the case with most all filmmakers, does not see his films until the laboratory processing and printing of the negative is completed or, in the case of film which is painted, scratched or collaged, until the film is projected on the screen" (Hanhardt in Jennings, 2015, p. 21). This viewing experience is true of other filmmakers too creating hand-made films. Oskar Fischinger demonstrated a similar opinion in relation to his own hand-painted technique. He wrote, "I worked nine months on a film, *Motion Painting No. 1*, without ever seeing a piece of it. All I did was check the exposure level of each roll that came back from the lab, so I only saw the film when the first colour composite release print was ready" (Mortiz, 2004, p. 191). For Brakhage, it would only be through this viewing experience that he could conclude how successfully the images captured or represented his hypnagogic vision. That he continued to portray his hypnagogic vision using the hand-painted method suggests his success in achieving his aims throughout each stage of the creative process. But it is only through the final produced artwork that this could truly be recognised.

#### *The contradiction within Brakhage's auteur status*

Above I have outlined some complexities surrounding Brakhage's authorship. These do not directly challenge his status as an auteur but provide a more accurate picture of his work with others and his control over the final films themselves. However, there are also potential contradictions in evaluating the level and significance of Brakhage's auteur status. Brakhage's motivations for filmmaking can be considered through two approaches: the *personal* and the *instructional*. This chapter has so far emphasised the personal nature of

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Western Cine, Denver, Colorado, who was hired for this job: he is in no sense a collaborator on this work".

Brakhage's experience in inspiring and creating films. As Brakhage's own words have shown, the personal and emotional connections he experienced are of the utmost importance within the creative process. His overarching visual methodologies demonstrated his dedication to understanding the ways in which he saw, experienced and lived in the world around him. Filmmaking is therefore a personal, unique and reflexive act of exploration and self-discovery. My analysis of the production process throughout this chapter has been separate from any motivations in relation to Brakhage's audiences. Their existence could be considered relatively inconsequential in regards to the highly personal exploration that takes place across both the direct and creative experiences. The personal motivations for creating a film are therefore presented as the most important reason for filmmaking, for "[Any man that sets out to make a work for audiences is never going to make a work of art. A work of art is made for the post personal reasons- as an expression of love" (Haller, 1982, p. 114). For Brakhage this expression of love relates to his own lived experience, which lies at the heart of his works. This is summarised concisely by Fred Camper, who believes "one cannot understand Brakhage in terms of what you see, or the way you view the world; you must understand his work by trying to understand the way he sees the world" (Camper in Wees, 1992, p. 80). This is also argued by Douglas Lee, who wrote, "Brakhage insists on our 'seeing; through his personal vision. Can he make the audience 'see' if he makes his films from a purely personal viewpoint? Can he 'unify the audience- educated and uneducated- in a shared response' if he is only interested in exploring his own vision?" (1971, p. 32). Consequently, the personal concept of the auteur is not enough to demonstrate the wider significance of Brakhage and his artworks.

However, Brakhage himself further complicates his auteur status. Demonstrating his romantic depiction of his film inspiration, Brakhage claimed that his works arose from something that Paul Sellors defined as "above or beyond human" (2010, p. 11). Brakhage explained, "I am an instrument, a conduit, as it were, for... you can call it, if you like, unconscious streaming" (Luna, 1998, p. 30). In addition to his own phenomenological inspiration, on occasions he explained his films "arose from visions and needs that could not be verbalised." (1979, p. 148). Similarly, when asked what had kept him working, he replied, "Compulsion [...] I mean I have to do it. I don't really have a choice." (High Ground interview, p41, Brakhage archives). This questions the level of authorial control Brakhage had during his production process, contradicting his representation of hynagogic vision. Brakhage offered, "You may lose the melody you thought you were developing from rose, blue, green, rose, green, blue, and other versions of that as basic tones, you may lose a note for rhythmic reasons because they

rhythm at that point becomes more crucial.” (Weinbren, 2007, p. 14). This connects strongly with the sublime theme across his hand-painted works. It suggests the channelling of knowledge greater than Brakhage himself that was felt by the artist as part of his production experience. Influences from nature, aesthetics, rhythm, unconscious thought and even sometimes religion have all been linked by the artist himself to his works- and working methods- at times. The sublime notion of such elements influencing Brakhage extends the romantic, mystic emotional experience of the production process and could be seen as further evidence of the impact of the world around us. Whilst it questions the authorial experience, this still demonstrates the highly personal phenomenological quality of the hand-painted film process.

In contrast to the personal qualities of his film-making, the instructional nature of Brakhage’s authorship centres on the ways in which his core aesthetic messages are shared. Through his visual methodologies and academic explorations, Brakhage demonstrated his passion for learning and sharing the artistic possibilities of film. Brakhage’s overarching instructional and phenomenological message centred on breaking free from the visual constraints developed through society and truly pay attention to personalised and subjective perception. This encouraged attention towards the ways in which lived experience is felt, and the visual and personal knowledge gained as a result. The notion of hypnagogic vision was a core inspiration behind the hand-painted works. The function of an audience (be this physical or academic) was not only necessary but integral for Brakhage’s instructional goal; to revolutionise people’s own understanding of their vision, breaking free from the ‘encrusted’ traditional ways of seeing that had developed. However, the abstract, non-representational qualities of the works outside of Brakhage’s own perception meant that his academic and critical career was vital in communicating this message. This is interesting in itself in questioning the success of Brakhage’s visual methodology, as Wimsatt argues in his argument concerning the Intentional Fallacy that “[I]f the poet succeeded in doing [his intention] then the poem itself shows what he was trying to do. And if the poet did not succeed, then the poem is not adequate evidence” (1970, p. 4). Considering the complex visual methodology Brakhage produced, that aimed to break away from the encrusted visual traditions he felt communities were ‘blind’ to, it is perhaps unsurprising that Brakhage did use verbal communication to draw attention to his methodologies. The authorial interest in Brakhage, through the avant-garde community, is evidenced through his academic career and professorship, his numerous published books and articles, and the diverse range of interviews he gave. His personal correspondence also offered noteworthy insights into the lack of academic freedom

he often had, in contrast to his artworks. In particular, his requirement to lecture on subjects that weren't of interest to him caused great irritation. In a letter to Charles Boltzenhouse, Brakhage wrote, "The classes at C.U. are so uninteresting that I have given up trying to be myself there at all [...] I just can't go on teaching Hollywood movies affably forEVER! . . .can I?" (Brakhage to C. Boltzenhouse, October 26, 1983). Outside of this particular academic instance, Brakhage's significance within avant-garde film provided a platform for the artist to share his instructional authorial perspectives and disrupt conventional ways of seeing. In contrast to Camper, Wees argues that by "challenging these [assumptions], Brakhage has taken it upon himself to help people see what they are truly capable of seeing; thus it is not Brakhage's way of seeing that we must come to understand but our own. (1992, p. 80).

Despite the objective nature of his instructional messages, Brakhage can still be considered to privilege the role and freedom of the audience in interpreting his visuals. His methodologies aim to encourage the audience to take up a visual investigation of their own lived experience without enforcing a particular reading of the images. Peterson remarks that, according to Brakhage, "the avant-garde film viewer needs only to be completely open-minded and open-eyed. The proper attitude is a relaxed, reception one, and the viewer simply looks at the film without trying to impose some narrow interpretation on it- what is in the film is whatever each viewer finds in it" (1994, p. 4). Brakhage himself echoed this sentiment in an interview with Gary Higgins, Rodrigo Garcia Lopes and Thomas Connick:

**RGL:** What do you expect of your audience A young kid going to see one of your movies, one who is already so educated inside a culture that trains him to look at images a certain way, like MTV, jaded, what expectations do you have?

**SB:** Ideally, I have no expectations. Realistically, I'd see written over the auditorium door what Dante saw as he entered Hell: 'Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.' [*general laughter*] But I would hope, if I had a wand, I would touch them with Keat's negative capability, 'to live in appreciation of mystery without any irritable reaching after fact or logic...' (1992, p. 62).

However, the strength of his authorship is integral to evaluating the success and significance of this underlying aim of his works. Brakhage's abstract hand-painted images are not instructional in themselves, the experience transferred into painted images is highly personal and private. For example, the abstract images of *Black Ice* do not relate to the representational narrative of Brakhage's own fall on black ice that he detailed in an interview. Instead, he prioritised "the voice of authenticity that speaks to the willing viewer, whether or not he understands the film at first" ([draft of Brakhage's last interview], ca 2002, Box 89 Folder 15). Because his visual methodologies are not objectively available through the film viewing, the instructional aspect of his auteur status is vital in understanding

Brakhage's personal motivations for making his films. Without Brakhage's many primary sources discussing his works and his visual methodologies (which this chapter has explored) the phenomenological knowledge of Brakhage's production experience would be unknown. It is thanks to the authorial significance within the avant-garde community at this time that it is possible to trace Brakhage's production experience at all. Therefore, the diversity and depth of Brakhage's authorial status provides greater freedom and choice for audiences, particularly modern audiences. The works themselves can be viewed without enforcing the artist's experiences because of the non-representational qualities of the works. Further exploration into Brakhage and his visual methodologies offers a particular focus to his works, connected to the personal experience process of the artist. This was less true for audiences during the original reception context because of the significance of the author to the avant-garde film movement. The esteem in which artists were held, and the demand for their perspective, encouraged critical analysis that highlighted the relevance of the artist's experience. Additionally, "Filmmakers regularly appear[ed] at screenings of their films so that viewers might be provided with proper introductions, explanations, and answers to their questions" (Peterson, 1994, p. 27). This emphasises the contrast between historical audience conditions and the impact it has on the viewing experience (see Chapter Four).

A final contradiction lies around the decreasing significance of Brakhage's auteur status to the filmmaker himself. This occurred particularly within the later decades of Brakhage's life, a crucial and busy time for the second-stage collection. As I have demonstrated through the phenomenological themes within the second stage collection, Brakhage emphasised not only his awareness of his authorial control publicly but demonstrated a need to change this towards the end of career. In addition to the move towards abstract, less-detailed film descriptions, Brakhage offered little insight into his direct and lived experience that inspired his works, therefore providing decreasing information on the personal and subjective meaning behind the works for himself. He explained, "Primarily I make silent films. The greatest gift society could give me is to permit *me* to remain silent" (Brakhage in Higgins, Garcia Lopes, Chadwick, 1992, p. 62). This links with the abstract tendencies of the hand-painted collection, including numerical or less descriptive titles and synopses. There are less representational clues for, or suggestions to, audiences, keeping the motivations behind the films (Brakhage's personal and direct experiences) private. Therefore, the filmmaker could be considered to have purposefully reduced his own auteur status within the final decades by providing fewer sources for interpretation. This increases the freedom given to audiences to control the meaningful experiences they have of the works. However, it could also be

considered to have exacerbated the lack of attention and critical analysis to this body of works. As David James writes, “resistance to verbal language in the films [and in this case, of the films] reappears as resistance to verbal language about them, for Brakhage’s interest in prelinguistic vision produced works that defy verbal summary and make critical commentary extremely difficult” (2005, p. 15). Both the personal and instructional perspectives of Brakhage’s authorial status are significant in considering the artist’s motivations. Their contradictory nature reflects the personality that lies at the heart of the second-stage works. In living and exploring his experiences, Brakhage’s works and methodologies do involve crucial contradictions that clarify that a phenomenological outlook cannot be objective. Brakhage’s creative and academic perceptions changed and developed as he did. Unlike the neat, historical stages of the avant-garde film movement, Brakhage “always resisted systems and nourished contradictions, so that his work would remain alive” (‘Stan Brakhage’, ca 2003). Therefore, the contradictions surrounding Brakhage’s authorship remind us that the nature of all his work was deeply personal and inherently human.

This chapter has added much-needed critical attention to the unique production process of the second-stage works. I have demonstrated throughout this chapter the phenomenological framing of this study and the significance of Brakhage’s experience to the production process. Through the direct and creative stages of production, inspired by Dewey, I have traced the significance of Brakhage’s own, private lived experience to the creation of the hand-painted works, to argue for their personal and subjective nature. This epitomises Brakhage’s visual methodologies that draw attention back to the root of experience, to the sensual information received by the embodied being moving through the world. The production method, in this light, has been portrayed as a reflexive process, Brakhage’s subjective direct experience has been channelled into art through his perceptions. These have manifested physically through the film celluloid and the painterly materials.

Throughout this chapter I have demonstrated that the production process of the hand-painted works is significantly different to Brakhage’s camera works, demonstrating a unique artistic identity from his perspective. I have examined the materials of the hand-painted films, drawing critical attention to the prominent role of painting to the production experience of the works. This evidences Brakhage’s skills and experience of using this new technique that essentially reflects the addition of a new art medium. Across the production process, I have evidenced Brakhage’s role as an auteur, and the impact this has had on his creative experience. The nature of his authorship is strongly connected to the original



context of the production. However, the romantic and modernist tendencies of the avant-garde during Brakhage's earlier career are intrinsically linked to the level of primary texts available from the filmmaker, even through the lesser-known second stage works.

Through my analysis of Brakhage's production process, I have continued to offer original analysis regarding the second stage collection. In particular, I have traced the phenomenological themes that are apparent across the hand-painted works. This offers new significant areas of study within the collection that directly link to Brakhage's own words (in the film synopses) and, as such, to his own direct experience.

## Chapter Three: The product or the process? A consideration of representation and abstraction

In Chapter Two I identified two crucial motivations for Brakhage's creation of the hand-painted works, which I coined the *personal* and the *instructional*. These two concepts were presented as contradictory perspectives; the *personal* highlighted the subjective, independent study of the artist's visual experience and perception at the heart of the hand-painted works. The creative experience of filmmaking was suggested by Brakhage to be a method of reflecting upon and making sense of his visual perception. This was presented without reference to the audience, emphasised by Brakhage's blessing for his audiences to have freedom to interpret his images and, later, his wish to remain silent on the subject of his works, in order to avoid impacting the way they were experienced by others. In contrast, the *instructional* was concerned with the communication of Brakhage's visual methodology to others which, to remind us of Wees' opinion, was Brakhage's way of "taking it upon himself to help people see what they are truly capable of seeing" (1992, p.80).

Both the personal and the instructional understanding of Brakhage's intentions have so far been evidenced through the artist's explanations (both written and verbal) that examine his intentions and his meaningful experience (including both direct, lived and creative). The case study of *Black Ice* (1994), for example, uses Brakhage's communication of the lived experience through language in contrast to the work itself. This chapter will therefore look beyond Brakhage's auteur status and refer back to the primary sources of the works themselves to consider what is represented and communicated through the hand-painted images alone. This is vital in evaluating whether Brakhage's auteur experience of the films is embedded within the images themselves and therefore readily available for others to experience. If so, this offers vital answers as to how the works can be experienced meaningfully outside of the artist's perspective alone. If not, it poses the question of what is represented through the painted images and how can the works be considered meaningful to all other potential audiences outside of Brakhage himself?

### The role of representation

Representation is a natural starting point in considering what can be communicated through the hand-painted works alone as it encapsulates, and requires, both the artist's and audience's intention. Whilst few comprehensive definitions exist, representation in relation to

art is widely understood as the way in which “something or other can be seen and, furthermore [...] something specific can be *recognized*” (Willats, 1997, p. 22). The significance of recognition in representation is crucial for phenomenological reasons. In order for representation in art to be recognised, it must offer some resemblance or connection to our construct of reality. Regardless of the subject matter of art, unique to each artwork, recognition in art connects the work to our lived experience. As I have previously argued, it is only through being-in-the-world that any and all forms of knowledge are experienced, received and ultimately known. Thus, through recognition of lived experience, representation explains how and why art can be meaningful through the way in which it explores, reflects or comments on lived experience in some way. In a similar way to language, art helps “articulate[s] the world of our experience (Gombrich, 2014, p. 221). Through the overarching subject of art as lived experience, artists enable “a piece of coloured canvas [to be transformed] into a likeness of the visible world” Gombrich, 2014, p. 246).

The conventional approach to representation through recognition has focused on objective imitation by the artist, which in turn can be objectively identified, and to some extent interpreted, by an audience, because of lived experience of the material world. The artist “pre-suppose[s] recognition; to repeat the phrase from Philostratus, ‘No one can understand the painted horse or bull unless he knows what such creatures are like’ (Gombrich, 2014, p. 221). Max Black also demonstrates the role of object imitation in art representation:

There on the wall is a painting: it plainly shows some racehorse or other, with trees that might be beeches in the background and a stableboy doing something or other with a pail in the foreground. That the picture shows all these things, that all these things and more can be seen in the painting, is beyond doubt. (Black in Gombrich, Hoehner & Black [Eds], 1972, p. 95).

As Gombrich and Black demonstrate, objective depiction in art is a key element of representation. It is important to state it might not be the artist’s only intention. As Catherine Z. Elgin explained, it is not clear “why we should want to replicate reality. As Virginia Woolf allegedly said, ‘Art is not a copy of the real world. One of the damn things is enough!’ (in Frigg and Hunter, 2010, p. 1). However, whilst replication might not be the only aim of an artwork, objective recognition plays an important part in demonstrating the link to lived experience. As both examples above demonstrate, objective recognition highlights the subject matter of the artwork, which might concern a bull or a racehorse. What both of these examples have in common is a focus on what John Willats coins “the *object* domain” (1997, p. 269). For Willats, this has been “the commonest function of painting, prior to the twentieth century,

[which represents] the domain made up objects like people and tables, whether real or imagined" (1997, p. 269). However, the trap that representation often creates is an over-reliance on the object domain as the central meaning available through the artwork. As Willats continued,

But pictures are often so persuasive that it is all too tempting to describe them, as we often do in everyday language, as containing features like edges and surfaces, or objects like tables and people. What they actually contain, of course, is lines of ink or patches of paint. Once we forget this distinction, and begin to think that pictures actually contain *objects*, it becomes impossible to talk about them in any useful way (1997, p. 272).

This demonstrates the way in which recognition can promote identification and description at the expense of the artistic materials and medium. The ability to recognise and identify things through the object domain leaves representation at risk of being reduced to merely signs that signify an imitation of reality as the core meaning or reading of the art as text. Thus, Willats highlights the risk of forgetting the materiality of the art medium in favour of representation. We will see that Brakhage championed this message.

Art and painting are in particular danger of the overreliance of the object domain because it provides a frozen image with a limited number of 'objects' to identify. However, the moving visual medium of film is limited by the object domain because "[T]he photocinematic recording is clearly a primary level of representation in cinema" (Le Grice, 1979, p. 116). The significance of the camera in capturing an actual perception of the material world strengthens this connection to lived experience through representation as it creates a tangible, photographic link to reality, or a fictional construct of a reality. Let's take an example from the avant-garde, Maya Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943). This work is considered a non-narrative and surrealist trance film. Although the dream-like trance is regularly considered a core focus of this film, the *subject* of the work is not as easy to confirm as the earlier examples of the bull or the racehorse landscape. This is unsurprising as the avant-garde aimed to subvert and disrupt conventional approaches to film. However, key 'objects' have become central to the discussion of the film, such as the knife, the key, the woman at the window and the figure walking up the road, to name but a few. The way these objects are weaved into patterns and the film structure is a core focus of the overall rhythm and narrative of the dream-like sequence. Whilst the overarching impact of these objects within the sequential images is unclear, in terms of meaning, the existence of the object domain within a framing of a version of reality enables representation. This is evinced through the considerable critique of this

work, it would be hard to find an example that doesn't highlight these objects as significant within the wider narrative.

### *Representation and the hand-painted works*

Representation offers crucial answers to some of the integral issues surrounding the hand-painted works, because, as I will demonstrate, the conventional understanding of representation is not applicable to them. The lack of critical interest in the hand-painted films and the descriptive nature of any existing analysis can be explained through the absence of traditional representation, which, to remind us once again of David James' critical comment, explains why there "appears [to be] resistance to verbal language about them" (James, 2003, p. 9). Unlike the vast majority of Brakhage's first stage collection films, the hand-painted works offer no connection to the object domain. The absence of 'photocinematic recording' through the discarded role of the camera prevents the concrete capture of reality, or a construct of reality, as is found in most films, including avant-garde films (such as *Mesher of the Afternoon* and Brakhage's camera works). Additionally, the hand-painted images provide no concrete or nameable shapes (such as cartoon depictions of objects) that would promote an object domain. The impact of this is that the conventional definition of representation is not achievable for the hand-painted films, as no recognition can be found through the images. Fred Camper succinctly explained this when he wrote that what the hand-painted films "attack is no longer just the naming of things but all forms of learned seeing and thinking, everything predictable, every immediately graspable image" (*Glimpses of Greatness*, Fred Camper, p. 44, box 7 folder 15). The result of this is "the viewer can't name what he sees- he can't fully see it, and in that sense can never fully own or understand it" (Camper, 1999, box 7 folder 15). Put another way, the lack of the object domain within the works means there is no recognisable shapes or images, which prevents any objective or clear connection to reality, the material world or lived experience. In Brakhage's own words, he managed to "essentially free[d] myself from the dilemmas of re-presentation (60<sup>th</sup> birthday interview, p. 24).

This creates a complex contradiction, as the concept of representation explains how artwork can be recognised, understood and, ultimately, meaningful for viewers. If the hand-painted works offer no representation, this would suggest the works of art are not meaningful. However, Chapter Two evidenced the meaningful direct experience for Brakhage that inspired the creative production of the hand-painted works, through his personal and instructional

aims. Therefore, for the artist at least, they are meaningful and based on lived experience. The answer to this contradiction lies within Brakhage's visual methodologies of closed-eye and hypnagogic vision, and moving visual thinking, which conflict with the object-based approach that representation has traditionally framed. For example, Gombrich argues that:

One cannot insist enough that the art of perspective aims at a correct equation: it wants the image to appear like the object and the object like the image. Having achieved this aim, it makes its bow and retires. It does not claim to show how things appear to us, for it is hard to see what such a claim should mean. (2014, p. 217).

Brakhage would dispute this fact as all of his methodologies are centred on exactly what Gombrich disclaimed; they focus on Brakhage's own visual investigation into how his perception manifests through his lived body moving through the world. Or, put another way, they are not interested in what we see, but how we see it; they are not object-focused but *process-focused*; the process of vision. His methodologies categorically disagreed with the conventional way of seeing and instead attempted to break away from these encrusted traditions of vision that favoured the subject of perception rather than the way in which it was perceived. This agrees entirely with Barbara Bolt's understanding of the issue with representation. The issue is "not so much representation in itself, but rather how, in the modern world, representation has come to be understood as the structure that enables representationalism to dominate our contemporary way of thinking (2004, p. 12). Through his process-based visual methodologies, Brakhage attempts to break the conventions of perception and, thus, representation too. For Brakhage, this reflected a key ethos of avant-garde cinema, which directly contrasted the representational nature of Hollywood film. In his own book, *Film at Wit's End* (1989), he explained:

The Potted Psalm [by Sidney Peterson] is, I think, one of the least seductive films I have ever seen, and that is rather a triumph that Peterson stumbled onto [...]. One of the reasons people often get so infuriated with this film is its lack of seduction. By seduction, I mean anything that leads you on. In the history of film, it certainly tends to be a technique which is the ambition of Hollywood. My movie made in Hollywood, or for TV, is designed essentially to lead the viewer on, to suck the viewer into the screen (p. 53).

This opinion agrees with the wider idea of representation as focused on the object domain, drawing attention to the content (as product) rather than the process of how it is perceived. Of course, in Brakhage's first stage films, this visual process can be still framed within the object domain, through its clear framing within a recognisable and relatable reality<sup>13</sup>. Whilst

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<sup>13</sup> Brakhage's works still subverted this reality, for instance his technique of scratching over photographic images is an un-naural reminder of this subversion. However, the wider framing of his films were recognisable as reality, or a version of reality.

the hand-held, sometimes blurred movement of the camera can make it difficult to identify all objects, the images are clearly located within the visible, material world. We can identify its setting as the world we live and move through, and therefore recognition and representation is achievable in a similar way to Maya Deren- it may not be the subject of the film, but it provides key signs that signify a potential reading of the work.

In contrast, the hand-painted images depict a visual process that is further removed from the material world and closer to the highly personal consciousness of Brakhage's lived experience. To remind us, Brakhage described the visual methodologies of the hand-painted films as "a form of thinking that most people are not consciously aware of [including] streamings of unnameable or resistant to nameable shapes, forms and even colours which I believe is the largest part of thinking" (Millennium film journal, p. 129). All forms of these visual methodologies (moving visual thinking, closed eye vision and hypnagogic vision) are not directly taken from the material world but are reactions to Brakhage's highly personal experience of living in this world. They are, in theory, abstract and invisible processes that take place in the mind, or behind the closed eyes. That Brakhage acknowledges they are ignored or under-acknowledged by society at large emphasises such forms of perception as an invisible process. This extends the degree of separation between the object domain of conventionally representational art and the process-focused, subjective images of Brakhage's hand-painted works. David James acknowledged this when he wrote, "It is true that Brakhage's work, by and large, evolved from representation to abstraction" (2004, p. 40). It is therefore unsurprising that Brakhage's hand-painted works are not representational, as the subject of his works are not of the object domain but of the subjective-domain, drawing upon personal and private modes of perception. It is not possible for anyone outside of Brakhage to *recognise* these images because they represent the artist's personal, mental processes of vision (and thus, more widely, of lived experience). The hand-painted images demonstrate the results of Brakhage undertaking this highly personal, private and subjective mental process of perception.

At this point, I am able to return to the key questions I presented at the start of this chapter, regarding the personal and instructional modes of authorship. By acknowledging that the hand-painted works depict a personal visual process, I have concluded that the works do not hold any objective representation. The personal mode of authorship is unarguably present in the images as this is the visual process that lies at the heart of the works, both in terms of

the inspiration (direct experience) and the mode of production (creative experience). However, the subject matter of this process means that the hand-painted images alone cannot represent or communicate this personal mode to others, especially as the personal mode of vision presented depicts an over-looked, seemingly invisible process of perception in society more widely. This conclusion is perhaps not unexpected from an artist who often used numbers to name his works in a bid to prevent any representational communication from even the film titles. It reflects the artist's philosophy in his later life that "[I]f something out there can be inspiring without manipulating a person without being reference to anything else in the world, be a thing in itself, then that seems to be an epitome of human making and experience (60<sup>th</sup> birthday interview, box 114, folder 6, p. 38).

The impact this has on the instructional mode of authorship is critical. If the personal content of the works cannot be communicated to others, and is therefore not readily available for others to experience, then Brakhage's visual methodologies cannot be communicated through the films alone. It is not possible for the non-representational images of the works to represent an instructional new mode of seeing, i.e. a visual *process*, to its audiences. Thus, the instructional mode is only available through Brakhage's authorship status. By presenting the works in light of his relevant visual methodologies, the works can be read as a representation of an internal, mental visual process. This presentation is available through the many channels of authorship used by both Brakhage and, more widely, the avant-garde, including written sources (articles, books, correspondence), interviews and lectures, and pre or post-viewing discussions. This relates to Foucault's notion of the author-function, built out of four key characteristics. One such characteristic draws attention to the presence of the author "as a means of classification. A name can group together a number of texts and differentiate them from others" (1969, p. 304). This notion of the author as a unifying construct, an identifiable presence that can connect multiple sources, means that the "function of an author [is to] characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society" (1969, p. 305). Brakhage's visual discourses are available because of this wider construct of Brakhage as author; tracing his arguments and visual methodologies across a number of sources and channels, which enables a rich and detailed insight into his visual theories that is greater than the sum of its parts. It is therefore because of the impact of the author-function that an instructional mode of Brakhage's authorship can be identified as a visual discourse within the American avant-garde film movement.



However, demonstrating the lack of representation in the hand-painted films (and the significance of other texts by Brakhage to his visual discourses) leaves a crucial question unanswered: if the artist's experience of the hand-painted films is not represented and communicated through the films alone, how can the works be considered meaningful to all other potential audiences?

### **Abstraction and the Abstract Expressionist Movement**

At this point, I would like to remind the reader of my current arguments regarding the concrete and the abstract in relation to the hand-painted collection. In Chapter Two, I confirmed that Brakhage's direct experience was concrete in nature. This chapter has, so far, continued to develop evidence of this concrete experience through the instructional process of the artist's visual methodologies. This focus on visual perception (specifically the way in which it manifests) continued to evidence the concrete experiences and inspirations embedded into the works for the artist's perspective. However, my recent arguments have also confirmed that this concrete experience is not available for anyone outside of Brakhage alone. Thus, whilst the works should not be considered abstract from Brakhage's perspective, the works as objects or products are isolated from this layer of concrete meaning. Alongside the lack of representation, and thus recognition, it seems logical to consider whether the works themselves, independent of Brakhage's auteur perspectives (and this his concrete experience) are abstract in nature.

This seems a logical step perhaps because abstraction has historically been conveyed as the antithesis of representation. Earlier, Willats highlighted the significance of the twentieth century as evidence of this antithesis and Roman Frigg and Matthew C. Hunter echoed this. They wrote, "...after spending much of the twentieth century in proverbial exile as abstraction and formalist aesthetic reigned supreme representation has returned with a vengeance to contemporary visual art" (2010, p. xv). The twentieth century is clearly a significant area of study, then, for considering the converse visual aesthetics and values that demoted the role of representation and raised the profile of abstract art. The reason for this historical development relates to the relationship between the media of art/paint-based media and photographic media. The twentieth century can be located as the critical development of photographic media, including film and photography. Following the arrival of photography towards the end of the nineteenth century, the development of this medium resulted in "a critical re-examination of the artist's adequacy in creating a convincing depiction of reality" which resulted in artists being "[F]reed from the need to create external appearances" (Moszynska,

1990, p. 8). Thus, the development of photographic representation encouraged a reconsideration of the possibilities of the art medium, away from representation, recognition and objectivity in order to uncover the unique qualities of art that set the medium apart from photographic forms. This movement away from representation was extreme and committed in both its aims and achievements, it had to be in order to prevent an objective reading of the art. As Gombrich explained,

we have seen that any three-dimensional shape on the canvas would be illegible or, which is the same, infinitely ambiguous without some assumptions of probabilities that we must bring to it and test against it. The painter who wants to wean us from these assumptions has perhaps only one way open to him. He must try to prevent us from interpreting his marks on the canvas as representations of any kind by compelling us to switch over to that alternative which we have observed in the interpretation of drawings; he must make us read his brush-marks as traces of his gestures and actions (Gombrich, 2014, p. 243).

Thus, the materiality of the medium is a core theme of twentieth century abstract art, which returned painting to its fundamental elements. By drawing attention to the paint and the canvas, painting returned to its origins, meaning “abstract art can be understood as an arrested, frozen phase of a kinetic light display leading back to the original, emotional, sensuous meaning of color” (Moholoy-Nagy, 1945, p. 75). Whilst this description is perhaps abstract itself, it indicates the success of abstract painting in denouncing representation and any reference to the external world apart from its own material make-up. As Dale Jacquotter summarises, “it is clear that abstract painting, precisely by virtue of being non-representational, is exclusively a matter of the placement of paint on a surface. It is abstract precisely because there is no content, it points to nothing beyond or outside itself” (2006, p. 56).

Historically this method has been most celebrated through the prolific Abstract Expressionism movement that received phenomenal interest in America across the 1940s and 1950s<sup>14</sup>. This new approach to art raised awareness of the core themes within painting that were freshly understood as the centre of the medium in the absence of representation. Anjan Chakravartty highlighted that:

The surface of the canvas, its shape, the thickness of the paint, and so on, took on a new significance. Co-opting the slogan of the American art critic Clement Greenberg, this is ‘art for art’s sake’ (Chakravartty in Frigg & Hunter, 2010, p. 47).

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<sup>14</sup> To add to its celebrity, Abstract Expressionism was the first alternative art movement to originate in the United States. It thrived following the end of the Second World War, where America had been cut off from its European art counterparts. As a result, Abstract Expressionism embodied an important sense of national pride, which has accentuated its historical significance.

Not only were these themes central to the art product, but they drew attention to the active process of the artist in creating the artwork. This was made clear via the notable example of Jackson Pollock, whose ‘drip-painting’ or ‘action painting’ technique developed dramatic interest in the method of art-making. Images and films of Pollock dripping the paint over the canvas became just, or perhaps more, common-place than the final work itself, accentuating the interest in process over product. The following extract of a review on Pollock’s *She Wolf* (1943), demonstrates this: “The painting is laced with relaxed, graceful, swirling lines or violent ones, until the surface is patterned in whirling movement [...] The paint is jabbed on, splattered, painted in lava-like thickness and textures (Manny Farber in Friedman, 1995, p. 77). This active interest in the creative experience of the artist encouraged an exploration of the art process as a performance, the canvas bearing the physical evidence of the artist’s visual exploration, through their presence and actions (see Chapter Four for more on the performative process of art). However, as Barbara Bolt astutely asks, “Such accounts of practice raise a fundamental question. If a painting comes to perform rather than merely present some other *thing* what is happening? (2004, p. 3). It is this crucial question that must be answered for the hand-painted works to understand what meaning is available for all who experience the work other than Brakhage himself.

### **Abstract Expressionism and the hand-painted works**

Considering its antithetical status to representation, it is unsurprising that Brakhage’s hand-painted works correspond with abstraction and Abstract Expressionism in many ways, both methodologically and aesthetically<sup>15</sup>. Of course, the second stage style draws attention to the materiality of the medium as a result of the lack of connection to the object domain. Similar to the historical relationship between painting and photography, avant-garde film championed Greenberg’s ‘art-for-art’s-sake’ perspective in its central aim to free film from conventional Hollywood cinema in order to demonstrate the qualities of the film medium. One of the ways this is most achievable is by freeing film from the power of representation

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<sup>15</sup> The Abstract Expressionist movement and the hand-painted works also correspond politically within the context of the wider avant-garde movement; spanning across the Arts, as well as other fields, including literature and architecture. This political framing of the wider avant-garde movement is not explored in this thesis, predominantly because of the depth and breadth of the American avant-garde film movement, particularly in relation to aesthetics, which is most vital to the subject of this study. However, it is of course important to recognise the overall framing of the American film movement within the wider avant-garde movement; a radical and diverse construct influenced significantly by the political and historical events of, predominantly, the nineteenth and twentieth century. Considering the impact of this wider movement on the American avant-garde movement, and Brakhage’s hand-painted works, would be an interesting yet complex analysis which, unfortunately, I do not have time to consider in this thesis.

alone. To once again borrow from Willats, “[W]hen confronted with pictures that are realistic in a photographic way, such as TV pictures, we tend to pay attention to the depicted scene rather than the picture itself: we look through the picture, rather than at it (1997, p. 279). As a pivotal avant-garde filmmaker, Brakhage shared this wish to free film from its traditional constraints, which he conceptualised through the primacy of seeing over thinking. Thus, his non-conformist visual methodologies demonstrate this interest beyond representation, as does the abstract aesthetics of the hand-painted images.

The methodological similarities (non-representational and materialistic) with Abstract Expressionism consequently resulted in similar visual aesthetics. Despite the different media used, Brakhage’s hand-painted works bear significant resemblance to the canvases of many Abstract Expressionist painters. Regardless of the difficulty in writing about the works, critics and academics were quick to indicate these similarities. The following quotes demonstrate such comparisons between Abstract Expressionism and the hand-painted works: “Imagine an Abstract-Expressionist painting made of light, moving through time, pure forms evolving into new forms at 24 frames a second, and you have some sense of a hand-painted Brakhage film” (Mason, 1989/9, p. 1). Similarly, “there are times when the image is comparable to the experience of witnessing a Jackson Pollock canvas come suddenly to life, each drip of paint swirling and swimming before the viewer’s eyes” (Poetics and the Visionary in the Films of Stan Brakhage, box 93 folder 8). These quotes, amongst numerous others, emphasise the strong visual, aesthetic similarities, which both focus on colour relationships within the work and portray a similar sense of energy and motion in the absence of representation. This similarity is of course highlighted also by a comparison of the artworks themselves. The descriptions of Brakhage’s hand-painted works demonstrate the lack of representation, there are no clear and/ or nameable shapes which results in similar fluid and expressive movements of colour across the canvas or film celluloid. To an extent, the similar descriptions indicate the artists’ successes in shifting attention to their respective media. In denouncing representation, both Abstract Expressionists (such as Pollock) and Brakhage succeeded in drawing people’s attention back to the materiality of the works as both descriptions focus on the materials of the medium, describing the visual aesthetic of paint on canvas or on celluloid. These similarities are particularly exciting when one takes into account some significant differences between the artworks. In addition to the current division in art media (see Chapter Four for my consideration of Brakhage’s medial location), the sheer size difference in canvases between Brakhage and the Abstract Expressionist artists is striking. Abstract Expressionist artists, such as Pollock, predominantly worked on large canvases, emphasising the physical role

of the artist in action painting in a way that could be considered a “bodily performance” (Sadler, 2009, p. 119). On the other end of the spectrum, Brakhage’s minute celluloid frames resulted in the multiplication of his painted images when transferred to the screen. Although completely contrasting in size, Brakhage’s working process also involved significant physical and personal involvement. As with Pollock, his body played a directly crucial role in creating the images, his fingers regularly making contact and leaving evidence of their presence on the film celluloid in order to create truly ‘hand-painted’ works of art.

It is of course important to point out that the significant similarities between the hand-painted works and Abstract Expressionism were impacted by Brakhage’s direct connection to, and awareness of, the Abstract Expressionist movement. The innovation of Abstract Expressionism painting in the 1940s and 1950s took place just as Brakhage’s career was about to begin. The commercial success of the movement ensured a young Brakhage would hear and follow the progression of such new aesthetics in art<sup>16</sup>. A critical example of this commercialism was Pollock’s well-known feature in LIFE magazine in 1949, titled ‘Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?’ The article led to Pollock becoming a house-hold name across the country, creating arguably the most popular abstract artist to date. The impact this had on Brakhage was significant. He recalled,

My start, in a way, I always think, is when I saw that LIFE magazine article when I was in high school about Jackson Pollock, where they were making a lot of fun of Jackson Pollock for his long painting of drips, [...] Somehow, for me, that was a major turning point, because I realized that this was crucial for me, Jackson Pollock’s work. [...] I began thinking about it and the whole business that comes out of Pollock, that, as he puts it, ‘I am nature.’ Of getting this energy literally from his soul, through a gesture, all the way over onto the canvas, that expresses the power of that gesture (Luna, 1998, p. 39).

This once again, evidences the personal, concrete role of art for Brakhage, that can be traced in the non-representational, abstract qualities of the Abstract Expressionist artists. However, even more directly, Brakhage credited Abstract Expressionist painters for providing the inspiration for close-eye vision:

By the time we’re talking about, I had seen many of the paintings of Pollock and some of the earlier paintings of De Kooning and Kline and others. I haunted the galleries. I began to be became aware that a lot of what was called abstract expressionism was rooted in closed-eye vision, and I began consciously searching my own closed eyes for forms, shapes, areas that were related to de Kooning, as distinct from Pollock, and so on (MacDonald, 2003, p. 5).

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<sup>16</sup> Brakhage also had a memorable experience of meeting a drunken Pollock directly as part of a larger group, although the Abstract Expressionist artist did not talk to, and was not aware of, Brakhage.

Thus, not only were Brakhage's aesthetics similar to the Abstract Expressionists, but his artistic motivations were irrefutably linked too. Both approaches emphasised the personal experience and perception of lived experience through art. The exploration of the direct experience through the creative experience again indicated the significance of the art process phenomenologically, which explains why representation and mimicry have no relevance. Similar to leading Abstract Expressionists, the overarching result of Brakhage's abstract and process-focused art has been an overwhelming critical interest in the personality of the artist, made clear for Brakhage by the critical acclaim of his personal visual methodologies (which could perhaps also be considered the success of his instructional motivations in an academic light). We are reminded again that the notion of the art as process does not simply relate to the logistics of the creative experience, but also to the way in which direct experience is reflected on and considered- fulfilling its "avowed purpose [...] to express the self to the self" (Shapiro & Shapiro [Eds.], 1967, p. 2).

To summarise, Brakhage's hand-painted works and the paintings of the Abstract Expressionists share many crucial similarities that are all born out of their abstract tendencies. Through a disillusionment of representation, and a return to the materials of their respective media, they both demonstrate how art can be meaningful for their artists, born from concrete lived experience, without providing any "recognizable relation to [this] visible concrete reality" (van Vliet, 2009, p. 32). Not only is Abstract Expressionism an appropriate and well-known example of how artwork can manifest such approaches, but Brakhage himself was inspired by the Abstract Expressionist movement, which played a crucial part in his own direct lived experience. However, it is important to clarify that the hand-painted works are not examples of Abstract Expressionism. Whilst their similar abstract tendencies drive them together in one respect, there are many crucial differences including the location of the medium (see Chapter Four for more). Additionally, as mentioned, Abstract Expressionism succeeded in gaining commercial success in a way that the avant-garde never did, and never sought. Thus, whilst Abstract Expressionist artworks embodied the significance of the process, their success across society still encouraged an understanding of the art as commodity. A final, significant example is the source of direct experience as inspiration. Whilst Brakhage has always highlighted the relevance of his direct, concrete experience to the material world, particularly through the recurring theme of nature, the Abstract Expressionist movement extended the non-narrative tendencies of their art to remove all direct connection to their surroundings. This is a crucial factor in the movement's historical context: in a decade still recovering

from the global tensions and horrors of the Second World War, Abstract Expressionism provided a personal outlet for artists that promoted the emotive and internal experience over any external (direct) stimulation from the material world. Conversely, Brakhage's visual methodologies are rooted in the material world, even when perceived behind closed eyelids.

This comparison between Brakhage's hand-painted works and the artworks of the Abstract Expressionist movement is therefore of most relevance in considering the conclusions that can be drawn from abstract art. Whilst other identities of abstract art exist, such as geometric abstraction, it is with the Abstract Expressionists that Brakhage's hand-painted works have most in common and therefore can potentially benefit from an understanding of. Abstract Expressionism demonstrates that abstract processes in art can be successful and receive critical acclaim, even mainstream popularity in this instance. It helps to break a traditional understanding of abstraction as insignificant and unpopular, and shows that the works do share aesthetic similarities with other art styles and movements, even if these are outside the boundaries of film (see Chapter Four). However, whilst Abstract Expressionism was a critical factor in the lead-up to the hand-painted works, it has also passed on a potential, highly significant failing: the reliance on the auteur. As I have shown, both Abstract Expressionism and the hand-painted works have successfully absconded from representation by drawing attention to the art process instead of the art product. However, both have instead developed interest in the artist as auteur as a source of explanation (and therefore communication) of the relevance of the work. Whilst for many Abstract Expressionist painters this interest was not wanted, it was a natural area of focus for an expressive form of art that documented the act of self-investigation through "an explosion of self" (Golub in Shapiro & Shapiro [Eds.], 1992 p. 93). Therefore, instead of an understanding of representation in terms of objective reality, attention has instead shifted towards a more personal and subjective understanding of how art can be used to make sense of and reflect on lived experience. Regardless of the stimulus, this offers a connection to reality but only one that is available through external sources. It is not available through the artwork itself as this form of art actively "discarded requirements for the expression of ideas or communication with the audience" (Shapiro & Shapiro, 1992, p. 26). Therefore, although I have demonstrated that the hand-painted works are abstract as products, the existing approach to abstraction through the Abstract Expressionist movement still favours the role and relevance of the artist as auteur, as a source of meaning. Without this auteur perspective, we are left with little understanding of how the hand-painted works as products can be considered meaningful.

This uncovers a wider problem surrounding abstract art. As I have already argued, representation, as a conventional approach to art, holds a significant place and status within art, across most artforms. Abstraction has instead historically held a very different status. Despite a surge of interest in the twentieth century, abstraction has, for the most part, been treated with hostility. As Moholoy-Nagy commented in 1946,

Ten years ago a positive emphasis upon the internal properties of art was usually branded as foreign, and hostile to the dominant provincialism. [...] For abstract art- at best tolerated as a legitimate expression for Europeans only- was for the most part regarded as highly unbecoming to any painter working in America (Moholoy-Nagy, [Ed.], 1946, foreword).

Even the Abstract Expressionist movement, despite increasing awareness of, and interest in, abstract art has not fully investigated the impact of abstraction, outside of an auteur exploration. Thus, there is a gap in existing literature on how abstract artworks are experienced meaningfully by anyone outside of the artist themselves. The result of this is that abstraction has “remain[ed] misunderstood by the majority of the viewing public; most people, in fact, consider it meaningless” (Tuchman, 1986, p. 17). For the hand-painted works, the next step required is therefore to broaden the horizons of abstract art by attempting to understand how abstract art can (or is) experienced meaningfully. This would enable the abstract identity of the hand-painted works (as art products) to be rightfully acknowledged and considered as a critical part of the art process. To clarify, the existing lack of awareness into the impact and effects of abstraction (in relation to the viewing experience) has meant that an integral part of the identity of the hand-painted works has been ignored and undervalued. It is only by considering and exploring the impact of abstraction, in a helpful and provoking way, that it is possible to develop a relevant strategy to the viewing experience of the films. It is only by developing this area of analysis that it is possible to make any headway on what continues to be the crucial question for the remainder of this study: how can the abstract hand-painted works be considered meaningful to all other potential audiences outside of Brakhage himself?

### **Introducing the Visual Narrative**

#### *Representation and Narrative*

To consider the potential impact of abstraction in art, I want to return briefly to representation. In summarising the key differences between the two, and the reasons they have been



seen as counterparts, representation and abstraction embody two different approaches: objectivity and subjectivity<sup>17</sup>. Representational art, as we have seen, directs the attention of the viewer, even if only slightly, by offering clear, concrete and recognisable connections to reality that can imply and/or communicate meaning. Representation is so widely found and expected in art that it has become difficult to know how to approach artworks that don't offer such clear connections to reality, as abstract art evidences. Some have even questioned whether such a construct exists: "[W]hy does representation continue to operate as the seemingly unassailable and assumed truth underpinning visual practice? Is it possible, for example, to think of our productions outside of the paradigm of representation? What would it be like to conceive an image not as a representation?" (Bolt, 2004, p. 12). Abstract art perhaps offers a case-study for such non-representational images, through its development of "a new form of subjectivity" (Leja, 1993, p. 2). Rather than promote and communicate meaning or recognition to others, abstract art offers a significant, yet still relatively under-considered, level of freedom of interpretation and perception. This freedom is a direct result of the lack of objectivity. Loretann Devlin Gascard captured this succinctly when she wrote, "when a non-representational or a non-objective vocabulary is introduced, we find that one reading cannot be more correct or reasonable than the other, because we have little or no experience against which we can test such readings" (1983, p. 293). As a result, the "ambiguities experienced with an 'abstract' image are [...] unsolvable" (Gascard, 1983, p. 294). Therefore, an enquiry for objective, representational communication in abstract art is futile. In order to design a helpful approach to abstract art, focus needs to be directed toward the objective elements or identities of an artwork that are available, not in terms of representation and communication, but instead in terms of the key characteristics of the work. These are objectively available to be experienced for all viewers, their presence and existence are less debatable, but the impact or effect of such elements are open to subjective interpretation. As I have demonstrated, for the hand-painted works (and the Abstract Expressionist paintings) such objective elements relate to the paint and medium materials, i.e. the makeup of the painted films. Therefore, as these objective elements are available within the works, the next logical requirement is understanding *how* these elements are presented through the artwork. How are the paint and film materials presented in time and space for others to experience?

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<sup>17</sup> Some critics, such as Anna Moszynska have argued that both objectivity and subjectivity must be relevant to any artwork as "it represents something- if only an intention" (1990, p. 8). However, this thesis is encouraging a mode of analysis outside of the artist's intention, thus objectivity in the hand-painted works is severely limited.

The concept of narrative is used in the arts to consider how artistic elements are presented and the wider implications of this presentation in terms of meaning. Of particular use is narrative's function, across media and genre, in helping audiences make sense and find meaning in artworks. Edward Branigan highlighted that "[T]oday narrative is increasingly viewed as a distinctive strategy for organizing data about the world, for making sense and significance." For him, narrative is "nothing less than one of the fundamental ways used by human beings to think about the world" (1992, p. xi). If this function of narrative is relevant for audiences, as well as the artist, making 'sense and significance' of the world, narrative offers a perfect solution to the abstract nature of the hand-painted films. It re-connects the images to reality and to lived experience through the audience, a necessary connection considering the loss of this link to reality from the artist through the art product alone. In terms of the ways in which narration supports the organisation of data, existing methods are diverse and require different criteria to be met. For Christian Metz, French film theorist, this is a temporal matter, created by "*a beginning and an ending*, a fact that simultaneously distinguishes it from the rest of the world and opposes it to the 'real' world." (1974, p. 17). This condition can easily be met within the hand-painted works, which further distinguishes the work from reality.

However, in other definitions narrative presents similar complexities for the hand-painted works as those that arise from representation. Gerard Prince extends on Metz's definition by detailing the content in between the beginning and ending, which includes "a representation of at least two real or fictive events in a time sequence" (Ryan [Ed], 2004, p. 149). Marie-Laure Ryan narrows the margins once again when she depicts narrative as "an exclusively verbal phenomenon. You cannot speak of narrative outside language-supported media" (2004, p. 15). Whilst verbal discussion *about* the hand-painted works is realistically required to explore meaningful experience, Ryan later quotes Barbara Herstein-Smith to confirm the role of verbal discussion: "we might conceive of narrative discourse most minimally and most generally as verbal acts consisting of *someone telling someone else that something happened*" (2004, p. 5). Both Prince's and Herstein-Smith's definitions of narrative are problematic for the hand-painted works as they present a literary approach to narrative. Through either events, objects or verbal communication, strong parallels are drawn between the function of narrative and reality, providing objective connections to the material world that do not exist in the abstract hand-painted works. This issue is more widely relevant to the concept of narrative as a result of narrative's traditional origin as a literary tool. From classical English literature to conventional Hollywood film, narrative has been historically defined through the concept of story. The framing and arrangement of objects in the scene such as

characters, setting, sound and language (also referred to as elements of the *mis-en-scene*) is an integral part of the makeup of the work.

Clearly enforcing the hand-painted works within such a literary narrative framing would be counter-productive following my earlier conclusions on representation. However, once again, alternative approaches to this traditional concept are available. A highly relevant example for Brakhage is of course his original location within the avant-garde film world. The rise of avant-garde film in the twentieth century was imperative to expanding narrative outside of its original literary restraints. Patricia Mellencamp explains the impact of avant-garde film for spectators used to conventional commercial film:

Without the expected doses of the time and space of narrative and its historical conventions of continuity style, the spectator was playing an unfamiliar game, caught off guard. The frightening edge of looking (often a derailed or demonic voyeurism), as well as abstracted visual pleasures, came with the risk of misrecognition, of seeing and being seen, of not being able to identify the scene, of the realization of the split between the camera eye and our eye, of the physical disparity between sound and image. Outside the rules of intelligibility and pleasurable placement within memory created by story and repetition, we were shocked, ecstatic, confused, irritated, and bored by these films. By reminding us that our eyes must work, that we are desire's source and impossibility, that the text was not located on-screen but was a process *with* and not *for* us, these work's engaged film's material apparatus, including the disruption of the comfortable place of the spectator at the movies and within culture. (1990, p. 6).

Mellencamp's observation of avant-garde narrative embraces the role of the camera and still reflects a resemblance to something plausible as part of the real world. That said, its emphasis on upturning and upsetting the traditional sense of narrative widens its possibilities, as well as providing space for the significant abstract motivation of process over product, widens its possibilities. The disruption of avant-garde narrative aimed to support audiences in recognising "that the obvious anger and frustration [they felt] are a function of the fact that these films confront us with the necessity of redefining an experience we were sure we understood" (MacDonald, 1993, p. 2). That avant-garde film could provide a structure for audiences to be re-educated on the role and experience of narrative is positive for re-defining narrative outside of representation. Thus, through an avant-garde lens, an additional definition of narrative can be considered. Cheryn Turim, an academic who has dedicated much time towards exploring narrative in avant-garde films, wrote; "Narrative becomes fragmented actions, a series of events whose representation is undercut, submitted to an obtrusive conceptual frame that can range from restriction to limitation to excessive expansion." (1985, p. 5). This implies that the avant-garde is more fragmented and subjective than the more traditional and objective perception that is presented regularly in mainstream film. It also indicates the impossibility of avoiding narrative: by creating a montage of events and

images through film, audiences naturally look for meaning through the sequencing of the images. Avant-garde filmmakers purposefully applied methods that disrupted and upset audience's expectations in order to prevent a traditional narrative reading of the work. This directly mimics the methodology of the abstract painters, and Abstract Expressionists, consciously refuting the role and relevance of representation in art by disrupting and changing the status quo. Jonas Mekas could be considered to develop this similarity further through his call for the 'plotless' film. Reflecting the nature of non-representational art, the 'plotless' film was, in James Peterson's eyes, a "call for narratives of a certain type- more like those of the international art cinema than those of Hollywood" (1994, p. 47). By returning to the essence of the avant-garde, Jonas enables narrative to be considered in light of those key elements at the heart of the hand-painted films: process over product, seeing over thinking and the materiality of the image.

#### *Extending the avant-garde narrative*

Avant-garde film narrative has definitely succeeded in manipulating the traditional constraints of commercial film but has not extended the concept of narrative far enough for Brakhage's hand-painted works. Whilst avant-garde narrative disrupts conventional literary narrative it still overtly relies on, or involves, representation: recognisable connections to reality. This is largely as a result of the continued significant role of the camera, which still ensures a photographic object domain. Of course, the presence of the camera is unsurprising, particularly as the focus between the 1950s and 1970s, at the height of the lyrical film era, was on the role of the eye in documenting perception and vision- something Brakhage substantially developed. As I have already outlined, the reason why Brakhage's works can still explore this theme of vision without the camera lies strongly with the artist's overriding visual theories concerning hypnagogic and closed-eye vision. However, this does set the artist's work apart, both from many of his peers and from most examples of narrative film, as the images that inspire the works are impacted by the physical world but do not capture it or re-present it directly.

Similar to the novel, film has historically provided a focus on actual, concrete things (whether these be landscapes, objects or people) that we recognise as belonging to our physical environment. In fact, as James Monaco highlighted, "the narrative potential of film is so marked that it has developed its strongest bond not with painting, not even with drama, but with the novel." (1981, p. 44). With this comes a system of complex references and semiotic codes that reflect how meaning can be created through representation and symbolism. In contrast,

Brakhage chose to discard this level of representation in his hand-painted works and purposefully sought out a final product free from such semiotic codes and objective meanings. He achieved this through abandoning the camera and images which literally captured the outside world. Instead, Brakhage used painting materials as the primary element of his images. Because of this reliance on paint, it is hard to see how filmic narrative (even of the avant-garde) is relevant. To analyse the second stage collection using a structure that was created for analysing the (non-existent) use of recorded images of the world seems futile and inappropriate. Considering Brakhage's distance from traditional story narrative, it is worth questioning whether film narrative really provides the most relevant approach for exploring meaning within the hand-painted works (see Chapter Four).

Thanks largely to his auteur status, it is possible to consider Brakhage's own consideration of narrative in relation to his art. Indirectly, Christopher Luna commented that Brakhage's opinion of narrative was similar to that of representation, that attempt "throughout his life to rescue film from the constraints of narrative- to prove that it can be art." (Luna, 1999/2000). This continues to suggest the need for an approach to narrative that reduces the relevance or, ideally, extinguishes the encrusted tradition of representation/ perception that Brakhage felt society had developed. However, for Brakhage this did not mean that narrative wasn't applicable or present in his works. Conversely, Brakhage understood narrative in an alternative sense from the literary perspective that developed. In an interview he explained:

Well I think it is, as Hollis Frampton pointed out once, it is a theorem, Brakhage's theorem he calls it, which means it isn't proved yet, as I understand it. That continuity art cannot avoid narrative, it is automatically narrative. That is, if it takes a certain length of time to experience it, which is absolutely ordered—and actually it always is ([excerpt of an interview with Stan Brakhage], [n.d.], p. 9, Box 55 Folder 2).

With this, Brakhage returned the discussion of narrative to Metz's initial definition, towards its temporal form. At the heart of the structure of film, its movement through time ensures narrative is still a fundamental and recognisable element of the work's literal makeup. In order to escape the entrusted literary and representational elements of narrative, Brakhage extended this notion to prioritise the visual over the representation: "There are visual stories, which are very suppressed in our time, because we are so overwhelmed by the literary story. We're so used to talk, and thinking of that in terms of story, that it's very hard for most people to think in terms of a visual story, and that is something quite different." ([excerpt of an interview with Stan Brakhage], [n.d.], p. 12, Box 55 Folder 2). In her book, *Narrative across Media*, Marie Laure-Ryan reflected a similar opinion, stating "[T]here are, quite simply,

meanings that are better expressed visually or musically than verbally, and these meanings should not be declared a priori irrelevant to the narrative experience.” (2004, p. 12).

The concept of a visual narrative is still genuinely pioneering, as it displaces the relevance of traditional narrative based on representation, which is still currently the conventional approach to film narrative. However, within the history of avant-garde film, the concept of visual narrative could be considered in light of the abstract animations of artists such as Len Lye, Norman McLaren and Oskar Fischinger. In fact, in outlining the history of the avant-garde film (see Chapter One), the abstract animations of these artists can be considered as precluding Deren’s significant avant-garde film developments in the 1940s, when she created “the first narrative film in the history of the American avant-garde” (Geller, 2006, p. 140). As Theresa L. Gellar continued, “up to that point [the avant-garde] had been dominated by abstract representations and formal experiments with animation” (2006, p. 140). This perhaps alternative history of the avant-garde is highly interesting for the hand-painted works, connecting them to an earlier visual style and form that the more ‘conventional’ avant-garde history replaced. This decade of avant-garde film also excluded the involvement of the camera within the film process, which Deren had yet to champion. Of course, Brakhage ironically played a significant part in this development away from abstract animations, by extending the role of the camera, only to return to this abstract mode in later life. Thus, once again, his first stage style can be seen to contribute to a mode of avant-garde film that resulted in his second stage style being irrelevant. This irony is perhaps extended further when considering the direct impact and inspiration the abstract animations of the 1930s had on a younger Brakhage. The artist labelled Fischinger “unquestionably the father of the abstract animated film” (Brakhage, ca 1979, Box 14, Folder 13). The works of Fischinger and Lye shared some significant abstract visual aesthetics to the hand-painted works, such as Len Lye who aimed, through his films, to create “a sensual experience of pleasure generated through color whose abstract and direct appeal avoided narrative forms” (Beckman, 2014, p. 167).

The abstract work of these filmmakers adds further weight to the need for a visual narrative that doesn’t require representation and literary stimuli. Yet, the impact of a visual narrative on works by Lye and similar artists would likely provide different results. Whilst sharing much of Brakhage’s visual ethos, the abstract animations that came out of the 1930s reflect a different era within the history of abstraction. In contrast to the emotive and subjective qualities of Abstract Expressionism, which the hand-painted films share, the abstract films of the

1940s were born out of the development of geometric abstraction. As Michael O'Pracy clarifies, "Brakhage's abstract experiments are not to be aligned with the more controlled graphic tradition of Lye, Richter, Ruttman et al but rather with the more mercurial, spontaneous brush-mark work of the post-war American abstract expressionist painters" (2003, p. 60). This difference in abstract aesthetic between geometric and expressionist abstract art is very important to the make-up of the hand-painted works and the aesthetic experience available for its audiences. However, this difference demonstrates significant potential and depth for visual narrative in abstract film, extending the range and diversity of approaches towards the concept of visual narrative.

To return to Brakhage and the visual narrative, this chapter has built a case for developing such an alternative, visual approach to narrative for the hand-painted films. This notion, originally constructed by the artist himself, supports the films' resistance to language and representation whilst offering a critical solution for understanding how such resistance to conventional analysis can still be meaningful. To be clear, this chapter has not developed any conclusions yet on what the visual narrative is for the hand-painted works or how it can be explored meaningfully. Instead, I have demonstrated that existing and conventional approaches to meaning in art, through representation and literary narrative, are irrelevant and unhelpful for Brakhage's second stage collection. Through an examination of the shortfalls of these traditional approaches, visual narrative has been presented as a significant solution to the abstract visual images that does not embody or represent Brakhage's authorial experience. Instead, the concept of a visual narrative supports the key objective elements that I have concurred *are* available for all to experience and are, rationally, the core subject of the work- the painterly and film materials of the works. Across the next three chapters, I will build on the concept of the visual narrative for the hand-painted works and present a new methodology of reception that considers how the visual narrative is experienced meaningfully. In Chapter Four, I will consider these painterly and filmic elements of the visual narrative in greater detail in order to analyse the impact of the visual narrative on audience members, by which I mean any individual who views the work outside of Brakhage.

This chapter therefore marks the end of the examination into the production of the hand-painted works and, in particular, the impact of Brakhage's creative experience. As I have demonstrated, the significance of this experience has been highly insightful in drawing much-needed attention to the inspiration (direct experience) and the production (creative experience) of the hand-painted films. It has enabled an identity for the second stage works to be

built and Brakhage's developed visual methodologies have allowed this independent style to be considered within their original context of the historic avant-garde film movement. However, this chapter has demonstrated that the artist's experience is of practical use only to a certain extent. Because of the abstract, non-representational nature of the works, the hand-painted works cannot communicate the artist's experience to others, which leaves the reception of the works available for subjective interpretation. Understanding how others outside of Brakhage have experienced the works meaningfully offers an entirely new critical area of study. I will continue to uncover an understanding of this different mode of experience in order to offer valid answers to the core problems that lie at the heart of the hand-painted works. These problems are centred around the current reception of the works: how and why are the hand-painted works relevant and meaningful more widely, and how can discussion and analysis of this style of artwork take place? These questions will create the foundation for my next three chapters, focusing on the reception of the hand-painted works.



# Reception

## Chapter Four: The Interdisciplinary Product: Developing the Visual Narrative

### The original reception: the avant-garde

To introduce the subject of reception, I will start by considering the original reception context of the hand-painted films. This is, historically, within the avant-garde film community. In Chapter One, I followed the development of the avant-garde movement from a production perspective which highlighted its auteur focus. This was highly relevant in building a contrasting approach to commercial film and demonstrating the true artistic possibilities of the film medium. Film became personal and poetic, experimental and/or shocking. This new mode of production consequently must have resulted in a new reception experience for audiences of avant-garde film, as the traditional parameters of film were purposefully disrupted and challenged. In fact, from a reception focus, the avant-garde movement had a significant aim: to re-educate and/or challenge its audience in order to break the status quo of film experience. This meant deconstructing the 'encrusted' traditions of conventional film reception if audiences were to reconsider the possibilities of film experience.

This was no small task, as Scott MacDonald explained, "... by the time most people see their first avant-garde film, they have already seen hundreds of films in commercial theaters and on television, and their sense of what a movie *is* has already been almost indelibly imprinted in their conscious and unconscious minds by their training as children" (1993, p. 1). This emphasises the significance of Brakhage's instructional status of authorship as a direct methodology for re-educating audiences. His visual methodologies directed attention to the complications with traditional film; that it had ignored the way in which perception manifests in order for us to truly understand our own vision, and thus our lived experience. This was a substantial and complex objective. As a result, it is perhaps not unsurprising that this instructional, entirely new approach to film could not be communicated through the film alone (as I concluded in Chapter Three) but required further critical discourse and academic examination, in order to communicate fully the reasons for this new method of perception. This process of re-educating audiences is something that can be acknowledged across the avant-garde community and it served to redefine the relationship between artist and audience. Avant-garde filmmaker Hollis Frampton offers a useful insight:

If you mean, do I think I communicated to those in the audience who tramped indignantly out of my films, the answer is no, but I think there is a problem with your idea of

communication. You seem to work on the assumption that you have this hole and I have this thing, and you want me to put my thing in your hole and that will be 'communication.' My idea of communication is very different. It involves my trying to say something I think is important and into which I have put all my thought and substantial labor. Necessarily, what I have to say will be difficult to apprehend, if it is original enough to be worth saying at all. That is my half of the communicative process. Yours must be to sensitize and educate yourself fully enough to be able to understand. It is only when two people- filmmaker and viewer in this case- can meet as equals that true communication can take place (Frampton quoted in Peterson, 1994, p. 2).

Frampton's answer in itself highlights the problematic implication of film reception in the avant-garde. As he suggested, audience members walking out of screenings was not a rare occurrence, as the films understandably offered a very different and alien experience in order to subvert traditional viewing expectations. Frampton also hinted at the participative role required of audiences; in direct connection to the arduous task of presenting a new approach to film, it needed active attention and effort for re-educating to take place (see Chapter Five).

This should have emphasised the importance of reception within the avant-garde. However, in direct contrast, reception has been widely overlooked across the movement. James Peterson is one of the few academics to consider this, in his book, *Dreams of Chaos, Visions of Order* (1994). Peterson champions an almost unprecedented interest in the viewer across the avant-garde movement and, in so doing, examines why this instructional aim of avant-garde film has failed to honour the experience of the viewer. The avant-garde, he explains, "must somehow come to terms with the fact that novice viewers struggle to make sense of these films" (p. 1), and thus require help in developing the appropriate skillset for avant-garde reception practice. However, despite the changed role of the viewer that is portrayed by both Frampton and Peterson, "one can read volumes and find almost no mention of how- and to what extent- [...] viewers make sense of American avant-garde films" (p. 6). In considering the reasons for this, Peterson turns, in part, to Brakhage. In relation to his auteur presence, he acknowledged that Brakhage is interested in film production but that "his theories of filmmaking have clear implications for the viewer" (p. 3). This revolves around the artist's visual methodologies, which Peterson considered through the notion of Brakhage's 'liberation theory'. The liberation theory can also be understood as Brakhage's notion of preconceived and childhood vision, returning to a state of innocence uninflected by the 'encrusted traditions' of perception enforced on us by society. However, for Peterson, this state is, in practice, unrealistic. Earlier, I drew attention to Scott MacDonald's understanding that preconceived notions of conventional film have a direct impact on the first viewing of an avant-garde film. Thus, expecting viewers to bring "an open mind is not

an adequate theory of the viewer's activity [and] just does not square with available evidence of what viewers actually do with avant-garde films" (Peterson, 1994, p. 5). This open approach, as Peterson indicates, contradicts one of the key aims of avant-garde artists, to disrupt the natural expectations of film reception experience. The result of this is significant; "if art is a perpetual revolution in which traditional forms and values are continually rejected, the viewer is continually confounded and offended" (p. 6). Therefore, through its originality and innovation in distorting and disrupting the conventional viewing process, an avant-garde approach to reception worked on a pre-assumed understanding of the audience's experience. This is in contrast to a genuine interest in hearing directly from audience members themselves about their reception experience. It is therefore "a consequence of this rhetoric of liberation that scholar and filmmaker of the avant-garde have been largely disinterested in the question of the viewer" (p. 6).

This demonstrates the significant extent to which avant-garde filmmakers led both the production and reception of the avant-garde film movement. It presents the avant-garde as an artist-led community. This deduction is logical as, from its origins, the avant-garde required significant input and investment from avant-garde artists. Building support for the avant-garde film, to secure the future of the movement, was integral to its continuation. Additionally, the independent and lone status of the avant-garde filmmaker as auteur meant they had full control over their own production, promotion and reception conditions. In contrast to commercial film, prior to the 1940s there was practically no avant-garde community and, thus, a non-existent audience for film reception. The prolific figure of Maya Deren recognised the need for a community or following for avant-garde film to continue and developed her own innovative screening methods:

Her [Deren's] idea of hiring the Provincetown Playhouse in New York to show her own films inspired Amos Vogel to follow her example and establish his 'Cinema 16', which showed experimental films for sixteen years. Her idea of mutual collaboration among the film-makers for distribution purposes later became the reality of film-makers' co-operatives (Dwoskin, 1975, p. 41).

Deren led the way in encouraging self-promotion within the avant-garde and in establishing a community for artists committed to or interested in the alternative possibilities of film. Her work encouraged other key figures in the avant-garde history, such as Jonas Mekas, who championed the creation of a "self-help organisation which became known as the New American Cinema Group" ("The Filmmaker's Cooperative: A Brief History", n.d.). Built up of twenty-three independent filmmakers, they helped create a shared dream of development for the movement, which was eventually realised in the establishment of the Film-Maker's

Co-Operative in 1962. This Co-Operative was crucial in enabling avant-garde work to continue to disrupt, distort and push at conventional film boundaries, protecting the movement from the radical reception it received (including enabling films to be screened that had been banned by more conventional outputs, such as Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night* [1958], banned by Cinema 16).

However, as Peterson indicated, this innovation and self-promotion from the avant-garde community also meant that artists essentially dictated the viewing conditions of avant-garde film reception to their audiences. Marty Cohen considers the reception of a Brakhage film:

If the evening featured films by Brakhage, we knew the drill: The films might be a few minutes or several hours in length; Brakhage would deliver many words on the subject of perception and the role of the true artist, if not a formal lecture then a series of maxims, gnomic utterances, or diatribes against Hollywood directors; the audience would be divided, like that at a Cage concert, among the already formidable clique, sensitive and dazed initiates, young filmmakers with technical difficulties, and a handful of newcomers who would walk out in disgust. Unexpected impediments challenged the faithful: bad seats; annoying delays; too much heat or not enough; too much incense; whatever. Once, I recall P. Adams Sitney (later the author of *Visionary Cinema: The American Avant-Garde*; by his late teens already a legend for his intellectual defense of the independent film) standing, a pencil in his hand, guiding the unreeling film into a discreet pool at his feet, while Brakhage narrated his latest creation (1997).

This described 'drill' of Brakhage's reception evidences the auteur-led structure of the reception experience and presents the screening as something more than just a film viewing. The artist's actual presence and significant involvement in the event was an integral part of this. In fact, in Cohen's description the actual screening of the work is overshadowed by the significant content that came from the artist presenting his work. The presence of the filmmaker "was the film's lure and promise, turning a screening into an event" (1990, p. 24). The 'event' embedded the views and experiences of the artist as an integral part of the reception. Mellencamp continued:

Thus was fostered the cult of the artist, in name or body, interchangeable with the film: filmmakers wrote their own descriptive copy and, like the voice of truth and authority called upon to sanction art, interpreted their films after the screenings in question sessions for audiences [...] merging film with maker (which the label of 'personal films' already equated speaking of their works as themselves (1997, p. 25).

Mellencamp's description accentuates the rise of the auteur in avant-garde film. The persona of the artist became an inseparable and expected part of the reception experience. Brakhage's instructional methodology could be communicated through his live presence at

the screening, by-passing the issue of the abstract quality of the works as products. The impact of his presence and direct communication to audiences promoted his perspectives and experiences as a way to approach the art. Mellencamp explained that Brakhage's prolific *Metaphors on Vision* offered such crucial insights and, as a result "[C]ritics paid heed and analysed the individual *experience* of these films as metaphors of consciousness, of light" (1990, p. 7). Of course, Brakhage's presence at the reception event has not been available since the filmmaker's death but also was considerably reduced from the late 1970s due to Brakhage's declining prominence in the 'new' direction of the avant-garde, in addition to his own request to stay silent on the subject of his films. He confirmed this himself in an interview, stating "Ideally I'd rather not say anything at all. I look forward to a time when we don't have to have this absurdity of the independent filmmaker travelling with the films in order for them to be seen at all!" (Higgins, Garcia Lopes, Chadwick, 1992, p. 62). In addition to the role of Brakhage as auteur, the makeup of the audience is another crucial area of study within the original reception context. Cohen's earlier quote addresses the reason for the close-knit community of the avant-garde. In addition to those who walked out or were 'dazed' through, we assume, their innocence, or lack of experience, of avant-garde film, there was the regular 'clique'. This following represented those already aware of and priorly committed to, the avant-garde cause. This includes other filmmakers and critics, such as P. Adams Sitney. That other avant-garde experts, or interested parties, were a core part of the audience makeup is highly significant. Not only does it strengthen the notion of the avant-garde elite but demonstrated pre-existing knowledge and experience for many members of the audience. Those with direct experience of filmmaking, or of the avant-garde community, would clearly bring existing notions and expectations that would impact the viewing experience. Additionally, such audience members had a clear, vested interest in the auteur approach to avant-garde film reception; hearing from Brakhage directly was relevant for their connection to the avant-garde, be this professional or amateur, filmmaker or academic. It provided an opportunity to not just discuss the film itself, but also the working processes and techniques that were used. Skilled or novice filmmakers could benefit from the guidance of other filmmakers. This, of course, would have helped develop the avant-garde movement and ensure that conversation focused on the materiality of the medium, the essence of avant-garde film. This also can explain the auteur approach to much academia and critical interviews surrounding Brakhage; the audience of filmmakers and critics were interested in the production technique and the artist's personal views. Of course, this development was significantly promoted through the rise of the Academy. Again, led by Deren, avant-garde

artists and critics regularly turned to academia. Such a move had many advantages, including promotion opportunities (and therefore readymade audiences in the shape of students), a way of sharing their visual methodologies more widely as well as crucial economic benefits, providing regular and much-needed income. Brakhage himself had a detailed relationship with academic institutions, guest-lecturing at many universities as well as taking up a regular position at Colorado University in 1981. He retired over twenty years later as a Professor.

The academic strand of the avant-garde is relevant to reception because it establishes the important role of education within avant-garde film. In fact, it expanded the parameters of reception in the twentieth century as audiences were not just those who attended official film screenings. As Scott MacDonald explained,

The emergence of film as an academically viable subject for investigation provided a new audience for popular and alternative cinema- the college classroom- and created a new interest in aspects of film history and practice generally ignored in popular theaters, and to a lesser degree, in alternative screening rooms (1993, p. 7).

Academia therefore became a significant aspect of the avant-garde movement, making the avant-garde almost synonymous with the study of film. This strongly suited the educational (instructional) purpose of avant-garde film, as a method of re-considering the possibilities of film and, for Brakhage's era, the possibilities of perception. This regular and reliable audience of students played a key role in the continuing development of the avant-garde, "universities [have] supported avant-garde film production, sustained its distribution co-ops, and served as its primary site of exhibition in North America" (Zyrd, 2006, p. 17).

The significance of artists/ academics who were also audience members within the original reception context is interesting in further understanding the avant-garde community. It demonstrates the cyclical relationship between education systems and avant-garde film; artists provided critical auteur insights into their visual methodologies and creative production processes to other filmmakers and academics who, in turn, developed their own work or wrote about the theories and films of avant-garde artists. The academic and educational interest in avant-garde was therefore at the heart of the movement's progression and growth fostered by the interest and investment of its artist-audience members. However, in considering reception more broadly it is complex. This academic perspective of reception only relates to one aspect of avant-garde audience members: those already engaged and aware of the avant-garde motivations. This is depicted as the majority of avant-garde audiences across academic literature. Their theoretical interest and understanding of the avant-garde movement is evidenced by the new waves of filmmakers

and films that were produced. Sheldon Renan wrote, "As with painters and poets, underground film-makers have always been each other's best audience. Film-makers are the most receptive, naturally, because they are the most tuned-in visually. But a wider audience is being sought, for the films *are* made to be seen" (1971, p. 225). Less is known about this unexperienced and uneducated (in terms of the avant-garde movement's aims) audience. As Cohen demonstrated, most attention of such audience members related to the strong reception experiences that led to people regularly walking out of avant-garde screenings. This, it is suggested, is a direct result of this inexperience of avant-garde film motivations. This audience provided a fairer test of the success of avant-garde films because of their lack of pre-conceived knowledge about the movement and its motivations. If avant-garde film could not communicate to this un-biased and uneducated audience, who had no understanding of the filmmaker's techniques and practices, it could not possibly succeed in its key aim of re-educating those used to conventional approaches to film. However, it has been this type of audience that was ignored during the original reception of avant-garde films. As Peterson argued, the lack of reception investigation into the avant-garde has meant the only evidence of viewer's experiences comes from existing auteur and academic sources, which reflects the educated understanding of artist-audience members or academic-audience members.

Whilst this is problematic for the original reception of the hand-painted films, it also causes significant issues in a modern reception context. In isolation of the avant-garde filmic setting in the twentieth century, modern audiences of a hand-painted film do not have the educational and practical filmmaking expertise that an original audience had. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the reception experience for such viewers would be significantly different. However, with no interest and analysis in this area, it is currently impossible to consider how current audience members (or those with no avant-garde experience) experience a hand-painted film. The reception section of this thesis is therefore interested in increasing awareness of this more 'typical' modern-day audience and of this reception experience. I want to explore how the hand-painted works are experienced by individuals who are significantly less likely to have pre-conceived perceptions regarding the experience of visual perception. They are, as a result, likely to be unaware and further isolated from Brakhage's auteur experience of the hand-painted works. This will therefore better test the relationship between Brakhage's production experience and the audience's reception experience.



Another important consideration for modern-day audiences is the materiality of the film image. This central ethos of avant-garde film conveyed the movements' "most radical break with the aims and aspirations of commercial cinema" (Le Grice, 1977, p. 88). For audiences within the 1960s to 1980s particularly, the materiality of the medium formed a critical part of the reception experience. As Brakhage's production process demonstrates, the original reception of a hand-painted film involved the use of the relevant equipment, including the projection of the film celluloid live in the space. The presence of the celluloid and projector emphasised the romantic theme of the materiality of the medium, a core essence of the hand-painted films. As David James commented, "Never does Brakhage allow one to forget the medium. The fabric of cinema shows constantly like the plaster under a Giotto fresco-light flashes, heavy grain, exposed leader, inscribed emulsion, even an occasional mid-flame splice" (James, 2005, p. 31). This historical significance of film production and reception clearly offers insight into a former period of time. These historical methods of creating and screening such works have changed considerably. Wheeler Winston Dixon's wrote, in *The Celluloid Backlash*, that "prints that survived [...], offered pictorial values that simply are not obtainable today; they were, in every sense, images from another era, another value system" (2016, p. 25). A clear example of this can be demonstrated through the role of the projector. Visibly a fundamental piece of equipment, the projector originally played a very active part in film screenings. Not only did it practically enable the works to be projected into the space, it also had key visual auditory effects that were an embodied part of the screening experience. The sound of the film roll running through the projector and the visual flickering created by the reels of celluloid were regularly associated with the materiality of the film screening. Consequently, it is logical to assume they played an important part in the audience's reception experience as visible and audible elements of the viewing. However, in today's climate the film projector is fast becoming redundant. The development of film technology has resulted in such modes of film reception becoming a nostalgic indication of past screening methods. The development of first video then digital platforms has meant the film projector is rarely used, even for avant-garde works such as Brakhage's. Accordingly, attempting to use original projecting equipment for modern-day screenings comes with significant complications. In a vicious cycle of decline, the development of modern digital equipment has rendered celluloid and other editing equipment, such as the optical printer, impractical- leading to overwhelming decline in the production of these materials and parts. This decline of key film equipment and materials had led to the gradual and increasing disappearance of the film medium completely, in place of digital technologies, resulting in

“‘film’ as a photographic medium [...] disappearing” (Rodowick, 2007, p. vii), or as independent filmmaker, Tacita Dean, described it, “medium eviction” (‘Save Celluloid, for art’s sake, 2011).

This has clear implications for the modern-day reception of Brakhage’s hand-painted works. Audiences today rarely have the same opportunities to experience, or connect with, the traditional and material film reception available in the twentieth century. This change in the viewing experience has severely limited the relationship an audience member can have to the true concept of ‘film’ as medium when viewing a hand-painted work, disrupting one of the central aims of these avant-garde films. Without this cultural experience and understanding, many of the methods and techniques applied by Brakhage, and other filmmakers, cannot be meaningful in the same way and cannot evoke that sense of the film medium. For the original audiences of Brakhage’s works, the artist never allowed them to forget the medium. For modern-day audiences, the original medium is not available to experience. Therefore, for modern-day audiences, the hand-painted works could be seen to be losing their film identity.

Instead, modern-day audiences are more likely to make contact with the hand-painted works through digital means, including YouTube and Vimeo, or through the few select DVD collections available where a different viewing experience is presented. There is no longer any sound from the projector and no ‘live’ presence of projected light. The closeness to the original celluloid, and thus the materiality of the image has been greatly reduced. The films no longer have to be viewed in a live, group setting (evoking a sense of liveness and performance) but are often experienced individually on a computer or TV screen. Where previously audience members would walk out in order to stop viewing the works, modern-day audiences can exit the viewing screen more easily, such as with a click of a button. Alternatively, they can pause throughout the film or replay phrases of the work- empowering audience members with more control over their viewing experience and altering the temporal qualities of the work. Whilst much of this might seem positive for audience empowerment, the technical changes have also resulted in an inherently negative consequence in terms of the ability to view films within the hand-painted collection. It makes many of Brakhage’s hand-painted works inaccessible for audiences. As I explored in Chapter One, few places worldwide hold a complete selection of Brakhage’s hand-painted films with a select few available on online platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo and through DVD

collections (Criterion). This means that for many people, the majority of the hand-painted works are, for the most part, unattainable.

The wider significance of the materiality of the viewing experience relates to the role of the medium. We know that the materiality of the medium was critical to the hand-painted works, to Brakhage more widely (his visual methodologies and production methods) and to the avant-garde movement. If the experience of the medium has become significantly lost for modern-day audiences, then a critical part of the identity of the hand-painted works is also lost for the viewing experience. It has changed so dramatically as to impact the presence of this key theme. This, once again, suggests that the viewing experience must logically be separated, to a significant degree, from the artist's production experience as the materiality of the medium cannot hold such a central role. For this reason, there is a need to re-evaluate the modern-day reception experience available to audiences viewing avant-garde works. The different historical context, with different technologies and art movements and priorities, suggests that modern-day audiences have a completely different experience of the medium of film.

### **Challenging the epistemic approach to the hand-painted works**

At this point, it is necessary to draw together some of the important conclusions from across the production section of my thesis, concerning the role of the medium. That the hand-painted works have previously been located within the medium of film is indisputable. More precisely, they have been situated within the canon of avant-garde film, as I have explored. Across Chapters One, Two and Three, I have demonstrated the ways in which the production experience of the works is highly connected to the medium of film and drew upon critical avant-garde themes related to the materiality of the medium. Although, as I have shown, some academics disagree, the artworks themselves embody the most basic understanding of film: light moving through space and time. The materiality of the image is reflected through the celluloid film base, the projection of the film through film equipment and even the editing process. In the original context of the production method, all three were crucial to the materiality of the film medium.

However, it is in relation to the consideration of film reception that I dispute the significance of the medium. The existing critical approach to the hand-painted works (regarding reception) has also been historically located within the film medium, through the avant-

garde movement. Following on from the first stage works, Brakhage's hand-painted films continued to be discussed or analysed through a filmic lens. However, this study has highlighted some of the critical problems of this approach. Firstly, the original reception experience is no longer available for current audiences. The materiality of the works, through both the film celluloid and projection of the artwork, are no longer created through the use of the original film equipment but through digital means. This reduces the direct materiality of the reception experience for audience members and also reflects a less materialistic understanding of film as part of film reception. Secondly, the auteur experience is far less readily available for audiences through Brakhage's withdrawal from communicating this production experience to audiences, even within the original context of the second-stage collection, in the latter decades of the twentieth century. This lack of communication is present both within the film images (non-representational and photographic) that do not communicate his visual methodologies alone, and also through less explanations of his experience in film criticism (interviews, articles and books etc.).

Yet, it is the third, most important reason that this thesis is centred on. As presented in my Introduction, the hand-painted works have received an insubstantial amount of critical attention, in terms of both content and quantity. Unlike Brakhage's prolific and photographic lyrical films, there has not been significant interest in, or analysis of, the hand-painted style or works. I believe this is because existing filmic methods of analysis are not appropriate or relevant for the hand-painted works. The reasons for this all relate back to the visual style and aesthetic of the works, which excluded one crucial piece of film equipment: the camera. Since the 1940s, the camera has played an integral part in the aesthetic of avant-garde film. It resulted in photographic images being created that share a key similarity with commercial film: representational images that reflect the object domain and promote a literary approach to narrative. Whilst avant-garde films regularly played with, distorted and challenged this conventional literary approach to narrative, they were able to do this because it reflected recognisable elements of the literary narrative through the use of photographic images. These photographic images were representational in nature, reflected the material world and, in the process, provided signs and signifiers that could communicate a literary narrative to an audience. To quote Christian Metz, "cinema, to be meaningful, must refer back to a code, to a grammar of some kind, [that] the language of cinema must be primarily symbolic" (Metz in Wollen, 1998, p. 31). The hand-painted works are missing this symbolic code because of the absence of the camera. As I argued in Chapter Three, without photographic imagery, the hand-painted works defied representation and the object domain, and instead

provided audience members with abstract images with no clear connection to the material world. There was no literary narrative. For this reason, it is instead necessary to create a new *visual* approach to narrative that does not require verisimilitude through photographic images.

The impact of the visual narrative, in relation to the hand-painted films, challenges the relevance of avant-garde film approach to the collection. Whilst the avant-garde aimed to promote an alternative understanding of conventional film, its underlying literary narrative approach was highly significant in how the images were received by audiences and explored by critics. It still reflected the symbolic code of film. Consequently, an avant-garde approach cannot provide a useful infrastructure for considering these artworks as it does not offer a critical approach outside of the symbolic film language. Thus, it cannot relate to the aesthetic nature of the abstract, non-representational hand-painted films. If an avant-garde analysis cannot promote these aesthetic qualities of the works it cannot offer the best possible epistemic approach. The lack of in-depth and non-descriptive analysis within the avant-garde community can therefore be seen to evidence the unsuitability and important limitations of considering the hand-painted works through an avant-garde lens. Put another way, the hand-painted works have received so little critical analysis from the film community because film theory has so little to offer the hand-painted works. They simply don't fit the existing parameters of the movement and therefore cannot prosper under a filmic consideration.

The unsuitability of film (including avant-garde) criticism for the hand-painted works has a clear impact on reception. If the hand-painted films do not convey the symbolic language of film, audience members cannot understand or experience the films using the same reception process as conventional or other avant-garde film. They require a different code or language outside of the parameters of film. But what language? The notion of the visual narrative would indicate this language is still visual in essence but cannot be dominated by literary representation, narrative or photography. As I considered in Chapter Three, abstract art, particularly Abstract Expressionism, offers some significant insights into such a visual language that is more subjective and expressive in nature (this answers some, but not all, of the questions posed by the current irrelevant location of film, as I will soon examine). It is clear that considering the makeup and code of this visual narrative is imperative in order to move forwards. Understanding the visual language available for audiences to experience during the reception of the works will help de-mystify the meaningful audience experience. However, in order to embody such art approaches into the reception method of the hand-

painted works, the current epistemic location of the works must change. By relocating the works outside of film theory, the hand-painted works can be freed from their existing inaccurate and unsupportive context within a representational medium. This relocation can be achieved by defining a new critical approach to the hand-painted works outside of the film medium. This new approach will answer to the aesthetic nature of the works and enable more, and more significant, conversation around the meaningful experience of audience members. In order to consider the most relevant new location across other existing media, it is necessary to consider the hand-painted works in an interdisciplinary light.

### **Interdisciplinary possibilities: Re-positioning the hand-painted collection**

To begin with, we should acknowledge that defining the concept of interdisciplinary is far from simple. The area of study is extremely broad and has been adopted across a diverse range of fields. It has been employed substantially within the arts, humanities, social sciences, education and technology, to name a few. As a result, attempting to understand and define the concept of interdisciplinary highlights one of its chief complexities. The broadness and flexibility of interdisciplinary is a vital aspect of its identity and yet it has led to a number of different, sometimes contradictory, understandings and practices across academia.

In general, the concept of interdisciplinary stems from a need to bridge connections between, and apply, different areas of thought and practice. It has been born from the existence of field/ discipline/ medium boundaries, limitations and expectations within a subject. Interdisciplinary study allows for the exploration of areas *in between* these boundaries, creating new relationships, connections and opportunities that break free from, or move, existing margins. The concept of interdisciplinary sits centrally within the modernist/ postmodernist conflict that questions the need for disciplines and media. One approach considers the boundaries around existing fields of study in a positive light. It validates interdisciplinary practice as a means of celebrating new and creative concepts born through the gaps that exist through medium boundaries. It “denotes not a rebuke to established fields but a collaboration between them and an extension of their separate possibilities into new areas” (Van Den Berg in Aastin, Rauch, Blau, Yudice et al., 1996, p. 276). An alternative approach considers interdisciplinary study necessary because of the limitations that result from fields and subjects. The concept of subjects as complete entities confines creative possibilities, and new discoveries, and can hinder progress. John G. Bruhn affirms, “Problems do not fall neatly within disciplinary lines and disciplinary tools limit the

parameters in which problems can be studied and solved.” (2000, p. 60). Both perspectives can co-exist within the understanding of interdisciplinary but offer alternative reasons for its existence and are of great interest to the post-medium debate.

#### *Defining interdisciplinary within the arts*

Because of its broad nature, it is first necessary to narrow down the area of study. Interdisciplinary theory will always be applicable for a variety of fields and subjects and the boundaries it challenges by bringing them together. As John G Bruhn confirms of interdisciplinary research, “Each research project is unique; its parameters determined by the nature of the problem and the questions asked.” (2000, p. 60). This does not prevent arguments between specific fields being relevant to other areas of interdisciplinary research but neither does it assume that one approach should be transferrable to other areas of study or defining of interdisciplinary as an overall concept.

The flexible and inclusive nature of interdisciplinary study has resulted in few attempts at defining it as a concept. However, whilst this broad nature is crucial in enabling further development between fields, without vital parameters the concept of interdisciplinary within the arts has become vague and unclear. The term is often used in a merely descriptive way to acknowledge the existence of multiple media or media connections. However, this does not consider what it means for an artwork to be interdisciplinary and therefore rarely succeeds in demonstrating *why* something is interdisciplinary and the impact of its interdisciplinary nature. Without this, interdisciplinary study is in serious danger of being considered a meaningless description, over-used and yet under-explored. Its openness could lead to a generalisation that would ultimately render it meaningless.

The depth and breadth of subjects that can be explored (as a result of its lack of limitations on what can be explored) enables interdisciplinary analysis to be applicable to everything.<sup>18</sup>

This is particularly relevant in the context of film. Even within the context of interdisciplinary study, film has not previously escaped its representative nature. In fact, existing examples suggest interdisciplinary study has been used to explore the involvement of other media,

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<sup>18</sup> It is also worth noting the existence of other, similar vocabulary that exist within the Arts. This includes terms such as intermediality (often technology-focused), cross-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary. The lack of clear and detailed analysis of these terms makes it difficult to define and differentiate between them, the scope of which I cannot explore in this study. However, I hope that this chapter, by adding to the depth and breadth of research on the concept of interdisciplinary study will enable greater insight into the differences between these terms in the future.

rather than the embodiment or fusion of media. An example of interdisciplinary film study demonstrates this succinctly: Kenneth Hey's article on the film, *On the Waterfront* (1954). The title of this article, *An Interdisciplinary Approach to Film Study* (1979, pp. 666-696), suggests an exploration of interdisciplinary study within film. However, whilst an interesting study of this American drama, its consideration of an interdisciplinary nature is disappointing. Hey starts by framing the need for such an approach within film because "as an aesthetic object which combines different artistic media into a single experience, film requires an analytical method which considers all contributing disciplines" (p. 666). By 'combining different artistic media', Hey makes direct reference to the soundtrack, the writing of the script and the inspiration from real-life sources and text in other media within the overall film. Therefore, for Hey, interdisciplinary is the inclusion or bringing together of media within one artwork or discipline. This is very problematic as, if considered the baseline for interdisciplinary work, most artworks (across all media) would, according to Hey, be eligible. Commercial films, such as *On the Waterfront*, rely on sound (music and voice), writing (script) and literary narrative (story and/ or connections to real life), and therefore would all be considered interdisciplinary by Hey. Even most avant-garde film involved many of these elements, as I have argued, even if their role was to disrupt the overall narrative. If, therefore, all (or the large majority) of film is interdisciplinary, then what new meaning is created by understanding it in this way? Additionally, the inclusion of other media within an interdisciplinary understanding of film weakens the case for relocating the hand-painted works. Brakhage purposefully excluded the direct inclusion of music, lyrics or speech (and literary drama) in most of the second stage collection. In terms of Abstract Expressionism, I also argued that the hand-painted works are not literal examples of Abstract Expressionism, therefore the works can't be considered to genuinely include Abstract Expressionism. Therefore, Hey's notion of interdisciplinary study within film might not include much 'inclusion' of other media in the hand-painted works and, as a result, would not enable the collection to be relocated outside of film.

A different example comes from Annabel Cohen, who writes,

Yet, the enormous expertise required to understand the complexity entailed by just a short film clip can rarely be mastered by a single individual. Researchers with expertise in film, computer science, neuroscience, psychology, music, linguistics, acoustics, audio engineering, sound recording, sound design statistics, music composition, musicology, and aesthetics can all provide insight (2015, p. 19).



This academic statement is true as a stand-alone comment. However, as a concept of interdisciplinary theory it is much more problematic. Its perception of interdisciplinary is, as the article title demonstrates (Congruence-Association Model and Experiments in Film Music: Toward Interdisciplinary Collaboration), specifically catered towards developing an understanding of 'interdisciplinary collaboration'. As a model for research, it encourages interdisciplinary perspectives through partnerships across media, an extremely necessary and useful approach. However, this in itself cannot deem something to be interdisciplinary unless the findings of such collaborations offer new perspectives and understandings between the media they are exploring. In the case of Cohen, without this crucial factor her outlook again encompasses too broad a catalogue of writing (and collaborations) without any fresh or innovative findings needed to recognise it as an interdisciplinary study.

Both these examples confirm the question set out in *Defining Interdisciplinary* (1996), "Is borrowing from another field or extending the domain of a discipline the same thing as interdisciplinary?" (Aastin, Rauch, Blau, Yudice et al., 1996, p. 278). This question is at the heart of the issue. It highlights the reoccurring problem surrounding artworks that simply merge or involve more than one media within the artwork or experience. Whilst this can result in pioneering and exciting results across the arts, it is not pioneering in an interdisciplinary way, by "lead[ing] us into the inter-spaces between and beyond settled disciplines" (Fosl, 2016, p. 8). Ultimately, if borrowing or merging is considered to be interdisciplinary, as discussed above, the term would be appropriate for most types of media across the arts and therefore so broad it becomes meaningless. Thus, interdisciplinary study would lose its unique ability to define new areas in between disciplines. The authors of *Defining Interdisciplinary* provide a helpful solution to this problem. They explain, "it is appropriate to distinguish between, on the one hand, *combination and integration* of media and, on the other hand, *mediation and transformation* of media" (1996, p. 28). The concept of interdisciplinary study should distinguish between these two separate aims; embracing the transformation and new relationships developed across the boundaries of existing media, whilst distancing itself from the mere combination of media within one artwork. For this outcome, we can turn to alternative terms such as cross-disciplinary, multi-media, or even to the possibilities of media such as performance and film, which embrace the merging of multiple media (what Hey was really exploring).

An important part of the nature of interdisciplinary study is its function as a process, not a product. It is an epistemological perspective through which to explore implications,

experiences and knowledge that can result from and through art. As Lynette Hunter explains, “Interdisciplinary happens when we commit to staying in the in-between, to staying in process [...]. Interdisciplinary is not a location but a practice with sociohistorically particular strategies. We don’t speak about an interdiscipline, but about interdisciplinary.” (2015, p. 2). For this reason, interdisciplinary study must be understood as a subjective and individual concept; a process that offers, broadly, a path to a shared intention (transforming the understanding of the boundaries or gaps between media) but without restriction. The way in which an interdisciplinary study is explored, and the findings that it leads to, are also innovative and personalised responses to the expansive concept of interdisciplinary. However, this level of detail and insight are vitally needed, in each instance, in order for art to truly be understood as interdisciplinary, and for that reference to be meaningful rather than a descriptive and ultimately useless label. The significance of the subjective interdisciplinary process is vital to the overall understanding of the concept as an academic approach. However, identifying and understanding this transforming of media in practice is very complex. Not only does it rely on subjective opinion but also has to be explored on a case-by-case basis, as the disciplines merged and the methods used to create this interdisciplinary state vary in every example. The increasing popularity of multimedia artworks, and the development of performance in the twentieth century has resulted in an increasing number of artworks that merge or draw on different media. Defining those that merely include different media or those that include other media *and* cross lines between media can, for some artworks, be a very fine line. Interdisciplinary study also enables relationships between different areas of different disciplines, with unknown results until the gap has been explored. In a similar vein, different artists and artworks are likely to explore unique and bespoke gaps, even between the same media, which result in different perspectives or areas of study. Therefore, there cannot be one universal process that highlights if something is truly interdisciplinary. Each example is unique. Consequently, a crucial question is how can the broad and general concept of interdisciplinary study be built upon without objectifying it and simplifying the depth of knowledge that can be uncovered? My understanding of interdisciplinary study would argue that this is an ongoing area of study; the wider notion of interdisciplinary study can only be developed as further in-depth analyses of interdisciplinary artworks are developed. I will provide such a bespoke, in-depth analysis of the hand-painted style.

## **An interdisciplinary case for the hand-painted works**

### *A quick consideration of the interdisciplinary product*

So far, I have been considering the concept of interdisciplinary study through a critical and academic lens, in contrast to a practical method of making art. This is because I am, at this stage of the study, interested in the notion of interdisciplinary as an approach to understanding the reception experience for audience members, through the concept of the visual narrative. However, I briefly want to discuss the interdisciplinary qualities of Brakhage's production process.

Brakhage, as an artist and as a person, had diverse interests and activities across the arts. He sang in a church choir as a young boy (his solos played on the radio) and performed many pieces of music to live audiences. He had a great interest in writing; he won a writing competition at high school, was the President of his school's writing and drama club and had originally planned a career as a poet. Brakhage often recalled that his friends had bought him a copy of Ezra Pound's, *The Cantos*, as a joke when he was younger, only for him to develop a real affinity and commitment to exploring the work. He developed interests and connections across the arts throughout his early adult life where he lived and kept company with poets in San Francisco, developed an "immediate affinity for Jackson Pollock" ([draft of Brakhage's last interview], ca 2002, Box 89 Folder 15) and other Abstract Expressionists, and was inspired by musicians such as Olivier Messiaen. Steve Ankler concluded things nicely when he wrote, "Stan was always reading poetry, listening to classical music, and pondering the issues raised by modernist painting" (2005). Across the arts, his interdisciplinary experience was therefore well-developed and his own writings and lectures emphasised the continual relevance of this interdisciplinary knowledge in his creative practice.

Brakhage's interdisciplinary lived experience is highly relevant to the production of his films. It demonstrates his enjoyment, education and understanding of other media outside of film. It supports an interdisciplinary consideration of the hand-painted works; Brakhage's knowledge, interest and experience of other media is crucial in exploring the artist's views on the possibilities of film. The exploration of the art scene in the 1960s and 1970s, which I will consider, will demonstrate the interdisciplinary qualities and approaches of the art community at this time. These approaches can be traced through Brakhage's own methodologies and perspectives, and therefore within his works, as I will show. They are vital in ultimately developing my understanding of the visual narrative. Thus, the consequences

of his interdisciplinary experiences and opinions can be traced into an analysis of the hand-painted films themselves, which will be a key aim of this chapter. However, the impact of Brakhage's interdisciplinary interests on the artist's own production experiences are more problematic. It is only through Brakhage's own lived experience that the relevance of this can be recognised. This cannot be accessed indirectly, or posthumously, following the artist's death in 2003, apart from through Brakhage's own primary sources (including his writing and interviews). These offer the best contact to the artist's thoughts and lived experience, which include some discussion of the interdisciplinary connections within his methodologies and works. Whilst this chapter (and subsequent ones) are interested in the audiences of Stan Brakhage, I will detail many of Brakhage's interdisciplinary opinions in this chapter in my attempt to consider the interdisciplinary qualities of the works. This will analyse whether Brakhage's interdisciplinary interests are of relevance to the works themselves, independent of the artist. Put another way, it will determine whether Brakhage's interdisciplinary experiences are transferred or visible in the works themselves, not just in Brakhage's direct and creative experiences.

#### *Returning to interdisciplinary study for reception*

To remind the reader, I am considering the significance of interdisciplinary study for a new critical location of the hand-painted works outside of film. This location is led and motivated by the ability of other media, outside of merely film, to better consider the *visual* language within the concept of the visual narrative. This visual language needs to highlight the key aesthetic elements of the hand-painted works available for all audience members to experience; the objective aspects of the non-representational visual code that are explored subjectively by the audience. In Chapter Three, I considered the relevance of Abstract Expressionist painting to the hand-painted works as an interdisciplinary approach to abstraction, defying the representational outlook of film. I concluded that, although not examples of Abstract Expressionist art, the similar aesthetics between this art movement and Brakhage's second stage works result from this non-representational focus. This comes from a personal and private exploration of lived experience. The artwork embodies the creative experience as a process, the lived experience is reflexively considered through the activity of art-making. This example demonstrates the way in which the hand-painted works extend the boundaries of film through the interdisciplinary connection. Abstract Expressionism provides a method for the abstract aesthetic of the hand-painted works to be placed at the heart of the analysis.

However, this is not the only interdisciplinary connection relevant to the hand-painted works. In fact, Abstract Expressionism provides one possible answer to one of three critical elements that I will argue play a crucial part in the visual language of the visual narrative for Brakhage's works. Whilst there are many pertinent aspects of the hand-painted style, I believe the objective aesthetic qualities that would be central to any subjective experience of the hand-painted works can be considered through:

**Movement:** moving through light

**Colour:** both aesthetically and materially

**Abstraction:** images aren't representational or imitative of the material world

These three elements are simple but encapsulate the true material of the hand-painted images, which could be defined as moving images of colour that do not create known shapes or objects. Significantly, all three are visual aspects which are important for the development of a visual language. In considering these three key elements in further detail, it is significant that the medium of film is not the most appropriate discipline in which to consider them all. Instead, I will demonstrate that other art media provide crucial solutions to identifying a visual language for the visual narrative, uncovering the significant interdisciplinary connections of the works. In this instance (for the hand-painted works), this visual language will revolve around three core media: painting, poetry and music<sup>19</sup>. Linking Brakhage to these media is not new, many artists and academics have touched upon such media connections when considering Brakhage and his wider oeuvre, including Sitney (2002), Steve Ankler (2005), Christopher Luna (1999/2000), M.S. Mason (1989/90), Bruce Elder (1998), Zuvella (2008) and Le Grice (1977), to name merely a few, as well as Brakhage himself. David James explained that these connections to other media offered a "greater resemblance [...] than to the industrial cinema" (2005, p. 9). However, a full understanding of these media connections, and their overall importance as part of a new interdisciplinary location, has not previously been explored and, as I have argued, the works remained firmly within a film location. I will now consider the relevance of painting, poetry and music in order to shape a new, unique interdisciplinary location for the hand-painted works that relates directly to the visual narrative of the films.

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<sup>19</sup> This is in addition to the significant elements of the film medium, particularly for movement, that enables film images to move in space and time.

### *Painting: Abstraction and Colour*

I have already confirmed in this chapter that the relevance of painting to the hand-painted works can be best considered through the Abstract Expressionist movement, which I analysed in Chapter Three. The medium of painting, through Abstract Expressionism, offered a critical solution for the abstract nature of Brakhage's second stage collection, moving narrative away from the literary and representational. Abstraction in painting highlighted its visual possibilities, which drew attention back to the visual aesthetics of the artwork. The paint returned to the forefront as a crucial material in itself, rather than simply the means to representation. Thus, the medium of painting, unsurprisingly, is also relevant for considering the element of colour in the hand-painted works. The artworks use colour in ways to avoid the referents of real life and are literally created through the production method of painting, instead of through photographic means with the camera. Whilst colour is obviously present in the medium of film, it is secondary to the story, message or symbolism (code) that the film is trying to get across. Therefore, the medium of painting is significant to both the production method and to the reception of the works as it draws attention to a literal and visible component of the hand-painted works. This was chosen by the artist but is also a highly significant objective element for audiences to experience as it the key visual component of the works. Therefore, as noted above, the role of the paint in the second stage works can be approached as a material and aesthetic component of the visual narrative.

### *Poetry: Movement and abstraction*

Poetry may seem like an odd medium to connect to the hand-painted works for two reasons: its representational value through language and its link to avant-garde film (the lyrical film). Yet, to remind us, Martin Brenz labelled Brakhage "a poet of his medium" (2003), despite the lack of words across his entire film oeuvre, suggesting the possibility of a visual poetic. Whilst not all aspects of poetry are relevant to the hand-painted works, it can offer useful analysis surrounding the role of rhythm to movement and the personal expressions of the artist, in a similar fashion to Abstract Expressionism. Brakhage is one of the most prominent voices in explaining the significance of poetry. He detailed the relationship between film and poetry in great detail within Bruce McPherson's *Essential Brakhage* (2005, pp 174-191), which I will explore. As previously highlighted, Brakhage was a keen fan of poetry himself. He felt poetry "was not translatable" and that it was "important [...] to approach poetry first thru its sounds" (p. 174). The sounds of poetry connect the artform to communication which can (but does not always) result in objective representation, depending on the level of

abstraction or obscurity of the words chosen. However, the sound of the communication does demonstrate the role of rhythm to poetry, a key aspect of movement. As Brakhage continued, in relation to poetry:

And then I learned, later, that [poetry] was a way for some people to approach film first, just through its vision. People who had found difficulties with films of mine and other contemporaries because of their subject matter, like they say, or the lack of it, as some thought, or their dislocation of things in subject matter, could suddenly recognize a beauty, just in the tailoring of the light. They saw that this was more than decoration- or something like a light show- but that it was a very articulate rhythm, that is, it carried the motion (p. 174).

The aesthetic or beauty of words moving through time can indicate an abstract element of poetry: similar to paint, poetry's link to language can depict representation (as prioritised by film through representation and literary narrative) or it can emphasise the materials of the medium (as prioritised by art through the material significance of paint itself). When considered in this light, poetry can emphasise the abstract qualities of language, which offer a "wonderful variety of possibilities [...] for shades of meaning" (p. 177). The notion of 'shades of meaning' returns to the essence of Abstract Expressionism as a highly personal and private expression of meaning. This meaning cannot be objectively represented or communicated in the work (it cannot be guaranteed the reader will pick the same 'shade of meaning'), but the art product works as evidence of the significant lived experience to the artist. Similarly, poetry can depict a similar personal expression of lived experience. The complexities of language can enable poetry to "move[s] past all the clichés of language" (p. 178) and therefore become more than an objective depiction of representation. For Brakhage, the rhythm of words moving through time therefore became musical. He evidenced this through a suggestion to "get some records of poetry in other languages that you do not understand and listen to the music of them" (p. 178). Thus, representation of the language could not take place, but the cadence and aesthetics of the sounds of the words could be appreciated (akin to music).

The avant-garde film movement of the 1960s also demonstrated the importance of poetry to the film medium, as P Adams Sitney explored in great detail in *The Cinema of Poetry* (2015). The best example of this is Brakhage's lyrical poem, also known as the cine-poem. In this era of avant-garde film, the poem was of most relevance in relation to the romantic tendencies of the modernist movement. Sitney linked the relevance of poetry back to the Romantics, as "Romantic poetry (especially that of Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley) plays a crucial role in *Visionary Film*" (p. 5). Thus, avant-garde film succeeded in translating the essence of verbal romantic poetry into vision through the similar motivation: personal

expression. Many of the lyrical films also explored the theme of nature, an essential aspect of romantic poetry and a critical link to personal lived experience: how the lived world is perceived and experienced. Sitney also highlighted this:

In lyric poetry the poet's language mediates between the raw and often aggressive presence of the natural world and the moral consciousness of the poet. The words bear the burden of simultaneously representing the environment or situation in which the poet finds himself and his precarious autonomy in relationship to it (p. 131).

We know that such lived experience is also relevant to the hand-painted works, for both artist and audience, even if not representational. However, both poetry and avant-garde film are, for the most part, representational. Sitney again demonstrates this by quoting Italian film director, poet and writer, Pier Paolo Pasolini;

In my view the cinema is substantially and naturally poetic, for the reasons I have stated: because it is dreamlike, because it is close to dreams, because a cinema sequence and a sequence of memory or of a dream- and not only that but the things in themselves- are profoundly poetic: a tree photographed is poetic, a human face photographed is poetic because physicality is poetic in itself, because it is an apparition, because it is full of mystery, because it is full of ambiguity, because it is full of polyvalent meaning, because even a tree is a sign of linguistic system (p. 21).

To begin with Pasolini, and thus Sitney, show the poetic potentials of film imagery as a result of the poetic potentials of the lived world. Pasolini's examples connect film, poetry and the lived world through representational images, which is not surprising as I have concluded that most film, including the avant-garde, relies on this and demonstrates this through photographic images. However, that does not mean that the poetic potentials of the lived world cannot be embodied in abstract film, such as Brakhage's hand-painted works. Again, I have already demonstrated that Brakhage's lived experience is connected from a production perspective, and that audiences cannot separate the painted images from lived experience despite the abstract qualities of the works. This is because we know from phenomenology that it is only through being-in-the-world that we can consider and experience art. Therefore, through its interdisciplinary status, Brakhage's hand-painted films may offer a critical example of how a poetic essence can be available in film in a non-representational and non-literary way, thereby extending the abstract possibilities of the medium of poetry.

Whilst my arguments above focus on the oral qualities of poetry in relation to film, it is also worth noting that poetry can be connected to film also through its own visual nature, as "poetry that is meant to be seen" (Bohn, 2010, p. 8). Known under a variety of terms (including concrete poetry, shape poetry, picture poems, new visual poetry and kinetic poetry) and traced throughout many periods of history (Greek and Roman times, the



Renaissance, post-World War Two and as part of the Fluxus and Happenings Movement), this perspective of visual poetry offers a different understanding of the relationship between the two media (as well as regularly the field of art and painting). The aesthetics of this notion of visual poetry are vast and diverse; involving playful spacing and shaping, and alternative approaches to the visual layout of lines and stanzas. Stéphane Mallarmé outlines such approaches within his Preface for his own visual poem, *'Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard'* ('A throw of the dice will never abolish chance'). He wrote, "The 'blanks' indeed take on importance, at first glance; the versification demands them, as a surrounding silence, to the extent that a fragment, lyrical or of a few beat, occupies, in its midst, a third of the space of paper" ('Stéphane Mallarmé', 2000). Alternatively, some visual poems question the boundary between poetry and art or painting further through their use of colour and pictures or photos. Works by artists such as Pedro Xisto and Ian Hamilton Finlay (the latter known for his poem-objects, such as his sculptures) demonstrate the visual significance of their poems and can challenge the medium they are most closely associated with.

The interdisciplinary qualities of this field of poetry alone is therefore of great interest for the hand-painted works; demonstrating the ability to embed, reflect or capture elements of other media within the construct of a conventionally verbal, representational artform. By questioning the boundaries of poetry as a written media, visual poetry of this kind relates strongly to abstraction, such as that explored in the Abstract Expressionist art movement. It can challenge its reader/viewer's expectations and develop a creative art experience that might not convey, or might distort, an objective and literary meaning; thus challenging its medial possibilities and parameters.

#### *Music: Movement and abstraction*

The medium of music is the most significant interdisciplinary connection for the hand-painted works. It is highly relevant for its approach to abstraction and offers a non-visual, non-verbal approach to art. As Anthony Storr explained, "in a culture dominated by the visual and the verbal, the significance of music is perplexing, and is therefore underestimated." (1997, p. xii). As Storr suggests, the medium of music is generally unconcerned with depicting a literary sense of story and tends to regard the stirring of feeling and emotion in its listeners. Music could be considered to have an interdisciplinary connection with language when combined with lyrics, which reflects literature and poetry. Lyrics extend the possibilities of

music, enabling it to provide representation to a degree<sup>20</sup>. Lyrics, similarly to poetry, use representation to enable listeners to empathise and understand the emotional qualities of the song that are being portrayed. Music has also been combined and merged with visual and dramatic artforms regularly, whether to enable music to elicit story (such as Sergei Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*, 1936) or to enable drama to stir a more emotional impact. Such examples include film, theatre, musicals, opera etc. (however, to reaffirm, the addition of music to another media is not interdisciplinary unless it extends the boundary of the medium). These examples demonstrate the emotional qualities of music that have been employed alongside dramatic art forms. As Storr highlights, "there is a clearer relation between *hearing* and emotional arousal than there is between *seeing* and emotional arousal. Why else would the makers of moving pictures insist on using music?" (1997, p. 26). Such examples also emphasise the difference between the literary qualities of such dramatic media, and the personal and emotional qualities that music, as a medium, brings and indeed heightens in listeners. Music does not tend to aspire to the representational qualities of such dramatic media as Storr, again, illustrates:

Music can certainly be regarded as a form of communication between people; but what it communicates is not obvious. Music is not usually representational: it does not sharpen our perception of the external world, nor, allowing for some notable exceptions, does it generally imitate it. Nor is music propositional: it does not put forward theories about the world or convey information in the same way as does language (1997, p. 2)

Brakhage himself echoed this belief in the personal and non-representational qualities of music. He explained, "I suggest that music managed at some point in its history to free itself from subject matter with its constrictions and speak more directly to people's souls than other arts.... And one is much more free to have those emotions moving through oneself and arrive at one's own conclusions" (Mason, 1992, p. 16). Both Storr and Brakhage's comments highlight a distinction between music as purely organised sounds moving through time, and music that includes verbal language. Once words (most commonly through the form of lyrics) are added to music, it increases the ability of a piece of music to represent something or convey subject matter to an audience. However, without lyrics, a piece of music cannot objectively portray the same literary story or convey an objective experience to all audience members, as the sounds and tones moving through time cannot dictate pictorial objects or events on their own and therefore cannot convey representation of things from the physical world. For Merton Yewdale, this separation from language represents the 'purity' of music

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, the relationship between music and lyrics has become an established and expected part of the medium. However, the original concept of adding language to the non-verbal medium of music was interdisciplinary.

as, “the purer the music, the less it brings to our minds a picture of any definite thing.” (1928, p. 399). The essence of this abstract quality of music is of great interest for the interdisciplinary qualities of the hand-painted works.

This abstract, pure quality of music is particularly demonstrated through the historical, and appropriately named, understanding of *pure music*. Pure music was also tied to the Romantic movement through abstract means. It distanced music from concrete representation or imitation and, therefore, depiction of the unconscious world. Instead, it highlighted the abstract tendencies of music through the instrumental and non-narrative qualities of music. Paul Bertrand and Fred Rothwell’s article, *Pure Music and Dramatic Music* (1923) described pure music as aiming “above all else at the esthetic grouping of sounds; having no direct recourse to poetry it expresses feeling only in a way that is vague and general, undetermined by precision of language.” (p. 545). Therefore, a ‘pure’ understanding of music is of great interest to the hand-painted works as it recognises the abstract qualities of music, and its lack of representation and objectivity, which is reflected in the painted films. Despite this lack of objectivity, music is considered an emotive and expressive medium. Meaning evoked through music is considered in a personal and subjective way, in light of the lack of literary narrative. Therefore, through its abstract nature, music creates a space for personal interpretation of experience and meaning for audiences. Away from lyrics or pictorial accompaniment, music does not include representational indicators and instead promotes a musical language that is often expressed as emotion or personal thought and significance. It is this non-representational experience that the hand-painted films also offer its audience. As a result, the medium of music is hugely relevant in moving away from the representational understanding of film to suggest more personal reception experiences.

Once the abstract potential of music has been recognised, its relevance to movement demonstrates the strong connection of the medium to the hand-painted works. Unlike the Abstract Expressionist paintings, which could suggest movement through the perception and movement of the eyes, music can be seen to provide abstract musical phrases moving in time. The significance of movement is critical to the aesthetic of music, again it demonstrates the important role of rhythm, as we saw in poetry. In fact, rhythm is held in such high esteem within music that “an adequate definition of rhythm comes close to defining music itself” (Sessions, 1950, p. 16). Rhythm is a key aspect in defining music’s movement through time, relating to the organisation of notes, chords and sounds through a piece of music. Whilst rhythm can be considered an attribute existing within a piece of music, it is only recognised

through a person's experience of music. In *Rhythm and 'Exercises in Abstraction'*, Elias Schwartz, W.K.Wimsatt Jr and Monroe C. Beardsley indicate that "rhythm is in one sense a psychological reality: it is *felt* when the mind perceives it (1962, p. 668). The individual experience is therefore necessary to the effects of rhythm. It therefore has an inherently phenomenological significance, stemming from our direct experience of moving through the material world. Rhythm can be found throughout the world around us: "The act of living is rhythmic from the beat of our hearts to the ordering of our time. We adopt rhythms in the form of habits: the way we walk down the street, how we pass our working day, when we eat and sleep, they all become rhythms that suffuse our sense of being-in-the-world." (Jackson, 2004, p. 29). Thus, rhythm is something that is meaningful on an individual basis, promoting the inherently subjective way in which rhythm is experienced and known through living in the world.

### **Visual Music: The interdisciplinary location of the hand-painted works**

#### *The Visual Language*

The interdisciplinary analysis above has demonstrated the significance of painting, poetry and music to the hand-painted films. More importantly, it has offered critical connections and similarities across the three key elements of the hand-painted films: movement, colour and abstraction. In particular, analysis from across these three media has offered much-needed examples of how art can be abstract and yet meaningful, indicating art media that prioritises or encourages personal, subjective experience of artworks over objective and representative communication from an artist to an audience. It has evidenced relevant approaches and analyses from other art media that better answer to the aesthetic nature of the hand-painted films than the photographic, literary narrative medium of film. Finally, it has enabled the visual essence of the hand-painted films to remain dominant whilst introducing vital non-visual artforms to answer some of the existing problems for the hand-painted films that have resulted through film theory. In contrast to literary narrative, I have been developing the concept of the visual narrative, which requires a visual language; a pictorial code of signs that audiences experience when viewing the hand-painted films. The three elements of movement, colour and abstraction are key aspects of the visual language of the works. However, the interdisciplinary examination of painting, poetry and music have uncovered other key similarities that relate to this visual language.

One of which is rhythm, a crucial part of poetry, music and, in some respects, painting. However, rhythm is also a crucial aspect of film. The relatability of rhythm to lived experience (and movement) has resulted in an exploration of rhythm across art. Clearly the movement of images in time, particularly in addition to the sound of the projector, has made rhythm an area of regular discussion across the medium of film. For Marilyn Brakhage, “it might be argued that film is essentially musical to begin with, insofar as it is based on a rhythmic progression through time” (On Stan Brakhage and Visual Music). This highlights movement itself as a factor that welcomes rhythm. For many films, the images that move through the projector are photographic but the hand-painted works reflects musical rhythm through the movement of paint. This further returns the notion of rhythm within the films to the musical understanding of rhythm as it emphasises tempo as an aesthetic focus of the work itself. Once again, the lack of representation returns the focus of the works to the materiality of the images, which includes the musical rhythm of images moving in time. Brakhage himself demonstrated this when he explained, “I began to be really aware that it wasn’t painting that film was close to, but it was music, because the paint turns into a kind of music once you see it in motion” (Luna, 1998, p. 33). The significance of rhythm has also been reflected in existing reviews of the hand-painted works. In *Visual Music*, two of the hand-painted works (*Night Music*, 1986 and *The Dante Quartet* 1987) are described as “vibrant forms [that] flicker rhythmically and imbue visual experience with a dramatic temporality analogous to music” (Brougher, Strick, Wiseman et al., 2005, p. 250).

Other additional elements of visual language through the interdisciplinary connections of the hand-painted works are melody and harmony. Again, these terms originate from the medium of music and are crucial in exploring the overall musical narrative and shape of a piece of music. Aniruddh Patel defines melody as “an organized sequence of pitches that conveys a rich variety of information to a listener” (2008, p. 182). He later quotes Simon Shaheen in saying that, a musical melody is “a group of tones in love with each other” (2008, p. 184). The emotional element of melody suggested here emphasises its aesthetic potential in an expressive and emotive manner. Transposing the musical concepts of melody and harmony into visual art draws attention to the significance of colour, connecting the musical and the visual methods of communication. The movement of coloured paint in the hand-painted images enables visual, aesthetic connections and relationships to develop. For the hand-painted works, this relates to the visual composition; the mixing of colours, the creation of new colours and the changing spatial relationships of colours, which all help form a melody line. Brakhage himself was interested in this connection, creating a parallel between

composer and filmmaker. He explained, "Film and music are continuity arts; they appeal each to one sense, very related, the shifting tones of sound harmonies in music is similar to coloration in film which I very early on regarded as intrinsically melodic, and ought to be answerable to each other in some kind of melodic schema" (Brakhage in Higgins, Garcia Lopes, Chadwick, 1992, p. 58).

Harmony in the hand-painted works relates again to the visual aesthetic of multiple colours or colour-plays on screen. At these moments, the crescendo of colour and movement make identifying a linear sense of melody particularly difficult. Harmony answers for the impact of so many areas of colours relating to other areas and movements. In music, harmony (the result of multiple notes or chords creating multiple layers of sound at once) is valued for the aesthetic impact and beauty or discord through sound it can create. This can develop emotional reactions and even physical reactions (hairs standing up on arms, shivers etc.). Relating the visual impacts of harmony is explained succinctly by Hajo Düchting when describing the musical possibilities of Paul Klee's work:

The different shades of colour combine like musical chords into a harmonic whole, in which the mood communicated by the colours is analogous to that of major and minor keys. The rich orchestration of the colour tones appears as a unified whole, even though the eye can still detect individual melodic phrases and differentiated structural rhythms (2004, p. 57).

Both melody and harmony are important features of visual language as well as evidence of its existence. Melody and harmony suggest themes within an artwork, communication of some kind that cannot be reduced to objective meaning. It indicates the successful identification of a visual code, as both melody and harmony are outcomes of the movement of musical notes or colours over time. They imply a wider understanding of the artwork as whole, although the subjective experience of this code is still abstract in nature.

#### *Visual Music: An interdisciplinary location for the hand-painted works*

Throughout the section above, I have identified the media, alongside film, that are relevant to the visual narrative of the hand-painted works and, therefore, to the interdisciplinary location of the second stage collection. This has demonstrated how these media connect and relate to the hand-painted images. However, I would like to be more explicit in identifying exactly where this locates the hand-painted films within interdisciplinary study. Music has provided a particularly effective understanding for the hand-painted works. It has offered a non-visual case study that accentuates and partners with other visual media and the visual language / narrative. Until now, the lack of approach towards abstract and subjective

reception of an artform has hindered the hand-painted works, as it has prevented an understanding of how the films can be experienced meaningfully. Through music and other interdisciplinary connections, I have explored the art elements that make up a visual language. This enables analysis to genuinely embrace the key qualities of the hand-painted films.

The collaboration of music with other visual media within the hand-painted works relates to an existing area of academic analysis, visual music. Towards the beginning of film's history, visual music enabled the previously popular form of painting to develop motion, whilst also empowering film to "challenge cinema as a dramatic art form" (Rees, 1999, p. 48). Its temporal quality was therefore of particular importance, as was its resistance to traditional narrative. The authors of the book, *Visual Music*, define the concept as bringing:

colour, form and sound together to create extended compositions that bore occasional resemblance to the work of the earlier generation of abstract painters while taking full advantage of the crucial element of time and incorporating sound and music to create a fully synaesthetic experience (2005, p. 19).

Additionally, they commend those artists who looked to "endow their canvases with the emotional intensity, structural intensity and aesthetic purity that they attributed to music" (2005, p. 25). Many of the existing examples of visual music from the twentieth century have been predominately identified through film. As Gabrielle Jennings wrote, "[P]erhaps the better-known history of Visual Music is its rich body of abstract film, a history originating with painters who turned to film and animation in order to bring movement to their artworks" (2015, p. 85). Disney's *Fantasia* (1940) remains a well-known commercial example, whilst visual music was renowned in the avant-garde film movement through the works of artists including Oskar Fischinger, Len Lye, Harry Smith and Georgia O'Keefe, to name a few. Outside of specific visual music art, the relationship between colour and music became a key area of discourse through a range of experiments and the creation of new equipment. These developments are often encompassed under the wider condition of synaesthesia which, in part, explores the way in which music and visual sensory experiences in particular can be interlinked. A range of colour organs and instruments were invented that aimed to uncover an objective and scientific relationship between colour and music, such as a scale or shared frequency for colour and sound. For Richard E. Cytowic this synaesthetic perspective "intrigued an art movement that sought sensory fusion" (2002, p. 7). This resulted in artists, such as O'Keefe creating art that was "inspired rather than synesthetically dictated" (p. 320), developing the artistic concept of visual music as something that could be experienced more widely than simply by those that are scientifically understood as synaesthetes.

Similarly, many experiments have set out to identify a generic emotion or colour that is objectively related or identified within a piece of music. The problem with this, as Peter Kivy explains, is that when this happens “we are not describing a disposition of the music to arouse such an emotion in us, but ascribing such an emotion, as perceived property, to the music itself” (2002, p.31). This therefore returns to an alternative goal from my own study of visual music- to consider an approach to visual music as a method of uncovering reception experience. Brakhage himself highlighted the musical significance of film through visual music. He explained, “And you want a film to be purely visual music. And so I have the same problems that composers have wishing for a pure aesthetics of music- no words, no symbols, no candles going in a piece, just music” (Brakhage, 1990, p. 113). In this quote, Brakhage draws together the relevance of the abstract qualities of music, defying representation through the construct of ‘pure’ music. This evidences the significance of visual music for the hand-painted films by the artist also.

The existing concept of visual music has, as Brakhage’s quote demonstrates, previously been located in film. A.L. Ree’s definition of visual music for avant-garde film sounds highly fitting for the hand-painted works. He wrote, “[I]n the abstract film, analogies were sought with non-narrative arts to challenge cinema as a dramatic form, and this led to ‘visual music’ or ‘painting in motion’” (1999, p. 48). However, we know that existing avant-garde analysis did not go far enough with this abstract methodology for the hand-painted films. Thus, film theory cannot explore the subjective relationship of film, painting and music that I have identified within the visual narrative of the hand-painted works. Currently, it is still restricted by the filmic limitations I have acknowledged. However, I believe that visual music is the perfect concept for outlining the visual narrative of the second stage collection. Visual music, therefore, does require development for it to compliment the interdisciplinary visual narrative I aim to achieve. This will, in addition to the works themselves, relocate my perception of visual music outside of film and into an interdisciplinary location. My understanding of visual music will part from the existing filmic approach through a focus on abstract colour images-real-life, photographic images would require a different approach. Less is known about the non-representative relationship between vision and music which, returning to my three principle elements of a hand-painted work, can be further defined as the relationship between moving colour and music. I agree with Douglas Jones in that this relationship is “a matter of human emotional feeling” (1972, p. 19). Jones felt there was “no scientific relationship between the vibration frequencies of color and the vibration



frequencies of sound" (1972, p. 100), he rejected an objective approach<sup>21</sup>. I plan to adopt a phenomenological viewpoint that explores the unique experience of audience members.

*Case study: Lovesong (2001)*

At this point in my development of the visual narrative, it is appropriate to offer a case study in relation to the hand-painted works. I have picked *Lovesong* as my example. *Lovesong* is one of the longer hand-painted works (10 mins 48 seconds), making it an interesting and in-depth work to study. Although some of the second stage works are directly inspired by music, as identified by Stan Brakhage, I have picked a film independent of this link in order to truly explore the visual music of the hand-painted style.

One of *Lovesong's* most striking features is the continuous presence of black paint. Most of Brakhage's works offer great colour variety, and *Lovesong* is no different. However black paint dominates and is foregrounded throughout most of the work, which is less common in other works. Its constant presence, and the differing relationship it has to the colours surrounding it, highlights the line of black paint as an ongoing melody throughout. At the beginning of the film, black paint is introduced in flecks, drips and blobs, interspersed with white backgrounds, thin colour washes and, later on, in darker colour backgrounds. The black paint shares the space with a range of colours; from yellows and browns that develop into greens and blues. The rhythm sets the tone for the film early on, with fragmented phrases of intense speed that rise and fall (accelerating and decelerating) on a rolling, but seemingly random, basis. Rapid washes of white or black regularly indicate a change or progression of the overall tone. The first of these, at around 1.26, introduces a new style of paint that will reoccur throughout the rest of the film. The paint seems wet and dripping, offering a completely new visual tone. Within this new tone, the previous musical phrases return but with the introduction of a new colour. Purple, along with the previous shades of yellow and brown reoccur before giving way to phrases of complete multi-colour. These passages continue to repeat in alternating patterns, sometimes with new colours added to the pallet.

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<sup>21</sup> This scientific approach includes the established concept of synaesthesia, a neurological condition where "the stimulation of a sense leads involuntarily to the triggering of another sense" (<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/synaesthesia>). Richard E. Cytowic's book, *Synesthesia A Union of the Senses* (2002), is widely acclaimed as the "first book dedicated to this condition" (pxii) and offers an extensive study of the ways in which synaesthesia has manifested and been experienced. Significantly, Cytowic does argue for the subjective significance of emotion within his scientific study, adopting "clinical and patient-led" methodologies (pxiii).

The melodic black paint continues to exist in amongst these developments and the rhythm continues to rise and fall.

In amongst these cycles, the movement of colour develops the sense of rhythm. Phrases of images combine certain directions of movement- seemingly going from left to right, from the back of the image to the forefront and vice versa. At times, multiple layers of image cause different strands of movement to collide and coincide, adding to the busy images. At around 4.17 this movement is emphasised by fleeting but frequent bright flashes that further brighten white images and change the colour of painted shapes. In amongst the harmonic multi-coloured images, where multiple different strands and shapes of colour co-exist within one busy, moving phrase, the flashes emphasise minute details of the paint, such as areas of breakdown, and add to the chaotic and 'full' feel of the images. In the middle of *Lovesong*, the black paint starts to dominate more than ever. A slightly slower rhythm provides more time to process the thick black blobbed shapes that move across the screen. These short periods are again interspersed with multi-coloured passages. By approximately 7.40 the quality of the colours has changed once again: besides the black, other colours become thinner and retreat to the background. The colours blend more and are less easily distinguished from one another. The original sequence of introduced colours repeats: starting with yellows and browns and expanding, or intercutting, with blues, then greens, then purples. At around 8.18 a different 'musical movement' is introduced that echoes similar styles to that found in hand-painted works such as *Stellar* and *Black Ice*. The rhythm slows as the colours fade in and out, instead of flashing and moving across the screen. The black melody fades into the background, emphasising the range of other colours. This brief interlude fades itself and returns once more to the similar cycle of busy multi-coloured images. For twenty seconds they move through the familiar cycles of blues then pinks, then yellows as the colour fades to once again highlight the blobs of strong, black paint.

At the end of the eighth minute, the tone for the finale of the work is initiated. The screen returns to multi-coloured images. However, the colours are less bright and strong, the colours blur into one, becoming more harmonized, but create a different aesthetic than previously explored. They appear more pastel in colour, creating rainbow-like washes that allow the black paint to once again dominate the image. The rhythm increases, as does the embedded variety of colours before decreasing slightly with the addition of flashes and fades. Within the last twenty seconds, a sudden white wash sets off a new tempo. Sudden flashes of colour build to a crescendo, and decrease again suddenly, with the images

becoming more fragmented and detailed. Tiny white cracks disrupt shapes of paint in multiple places across images. *Lovesong* ends with the final domination of black, which fills the background, as vertical lines and strips of colour flit across the screen and abruptly come to an end.

### **Returning to phenomenology**

This case study emphasises the creation of a sense of musical appreciation in my experience of the works, through the new interdisciplinary location of visual music. As I have argued, filmic language is less relevant without literary narrative, and instead musical language helps to express patterns of moving colour occurring through light and paint. Such descriptions themselves are poetic in nature whilst reflecting the visual aesthetic of colour at the heart of Abstract Expressionism. Because of its stronger relationship to abstraction, musical language also provides description that can start to intimate the emotional experience created for the audience member by the visuals: for example, a crescendo suggests a heightened emotional state, whilst the harmonic passages suggest beauty and unity, whether this be more peaceful in passages where the rhythm is slower, or more vibrant and energetic when they accelerate. These descriptions do offer subjective thoughts as the aesthetic impact might not be experienced by another audience member. What I have described as a crescendo might not be experienced as such by another viewer; the increased pace is likely to be recognised (as it is more factual than emotional) but the emotional impact of that pressure and tension or relief may not have the same meaningful impact on someone else.

Whilst developing the visual language and the visual narrative is a crucial step, such a description on its own is meaningless. It offers merely a running commentary describing these elements of the film. Similar (although significantly shorter) descriptions have been written by artists and academics but have still failed to offer an approach to meaning through experiencing the artworks. They have not helped audiences to engage with the works on a personal level. The description of colour and music may be potentially interesting on its own, but it doesn't explore how or why these colour rhythms, melodies and harmonies can create an emotional and meaningful response. The key question this establishes is how can colour independently (in an abstract setting) develop an emotional response for an audience member? To answer this requires a return to phenomenology.

Anyone's understanding or experience of colours come from their experience as a living being moving through the world. From nature, the objects around us, the colour sources

found on our own bodies; colour is something people are completely immersed in all the time. However, our relationship with colour is completely subjective. It is impossible to comment on how another person 'sees' a colour, as Merleau-Ponty explains- "I will never know how you see red, and you will never know how I see it; but this separation of consciousness is recognised only after a failure of communication" (1964, p. 17). Accepting that an individual's perception of colours is subjective, there are two significant roles that experience plays in creating this personal experience of colour. The first is linked to direct experience moving through the physical world: "By direct experience we gradually learn through living to understand the relations of colour and light to the world around" (Klaren, 2013, p. 989). The sensory information received through experience will always include colour and light, not just for the eyes but for the embodied body. For example, when walking through a garden of red roses, the body's embodied senses can experience simultaneously the colour of the red with the eyes, the smell of the rose with the nose, the touch of the petals with the body and the sound as we touch the petal, or the wind moves the flower, or even the noise of others or nature in the background. The redness of the colour experienced by the eyes cannot be separated from the other sensory information received by the body as part of the embodied experience. Additionally, the way in which the moment is experienced (the mood of the individual, whether they are alone or with others etc.) might affect the way the redness of the rose is experienced. Whilst this is only one brief example of an experience of red, it plays a part in the build-up of our experience of that colour. I can't have shared this same experience of red in the same way. My sensory experience is different as are the thoughts and emotions that build up my memory of a different perception of red. Any concept of 'red' cannot be understood apart from direct experience as it is only through being in the world that we have knowledge of 'red'. Merleau-Ponty again summarises this, concluding that "my field of perception is constantly filled with a play of colours, noises and fleeting tactile sensations which I cannot relate precisely to the context of my cleverly perceived world, yet which I nevertheless immediately 'place' in the world, without ever confusing them with my daydreams" (2002, p. xi). Ulf Klaren also drew upon this embodied experience. He wrote:

Experiencing colour and light in a living context always implies an intuitive and emotional understanding: we experience spontaneously spatial relations, the atmosphere or a room or the tone of an object. And our experience of the world around is always influenced by indirect experience- cultural values and knowledge (2013, p. 990).

As Klaren suggested, indirect experience is also significant, encompassing the phenomenological importance of colour to the individual self and our personal

understanding of the world. This confirms the thoughts of Laura Marks who writes, “[a]ll of us hold knowledge in our bodies and memory in our senses.” (2000, p. xiii). The colour red cannot be separated from the cultural values it possesses within our life: in many Asian countries it is a symbol of good luck and prosperity, for some countries it is linked with communist beliefs and for some western countries red plays a key part in Valentines celebrations. These symbolic uses of red again are unlikely to dominate the overall experience of the colour red and are only one small example of an individual’s interaction with red, but yet they cannot be separated from the wealth of living experience of red that belong to our individual make-up. Whilst colour is therefore unarguably a key factor in all our sensory experience, the ability to identify and explain our experience of colour is much more complex. Firstly, similarly to literary narrative, the association of colour through the senses is experienced through objects. Through being in the world, direct experience is strongly correlated to the tangible items we experience. Due to their abstraction, the hand-painted works provide a very unique opportunity to explore the personal experience of colour within an abstract context. The colour becomes the primary element of study and cannot be separated from an audience member’s individual living experiences of that colour. This does not mean experiencing the colour red within *Lovesong* will evoke the memory of the red rose, or the thoughts and emotions of that experience. However, it does confirm that, because of its abstract nature, the flash of red experienced can only be understood as red because I have encountered ‘red’ in my lived experience. It also cannot possibly evoke the same thoughts and feelings for me that it might for the audience member next to me. When this view is expanded to allow for the multi-coloured, exploding images of colour and movement that are experienced within a second of a hand-painted film, the experience must be subjective.

Phenomenology is a key method for moving visual narrative further. It helps explain why colour can provide meaningful experiences and is inherently linked to our daily living experience. It also explains, through the abstract images, why an objective yet meaningful approach to these moving coloured images cannot be created. This chapter therefore concludes with the follow question: how do audience members experience the abstract and moving colour images and, therefore, experience the visual narrative of Brakhage’s hand-painted works? In order to answer this question, and in order for my theory of visual narrative to develop more meaningfully, I must turn to reception. To break free from the object and develop comfort in experiencing colour in an abstract setting, a new reception

theory is needed that builds on the visual music of the hand-painted works and encourages a truly subjective approach to reception in the creative arts.

## **Chapter Five: The Interdisciplinary Process: a performative, co-creative and live reception**

In Chapter Four I explored the interdisciplinary identity of the hand-painted collection and defined the visual narrative present within the works, as contrasted with a literary narrative. This visual narrative demonstrates key elements of the films as art objects. However, I concluded that the visual narrative alone cannot expand the existing knowledge on the reception of the hand-painted works. This is because it cannot examine how the abstract visual data of the works are meaningfully perceived by individuals. For many narrative forms of artwork, the signification of meaning exists through the representational qualities that exist within the artwork as an object. However, for the abstract hand-painted works, meaningful interpretation can only be understood by exploring the signification process for audience members- thus drawing attention to the act of *experiencing* the artwork. Consequently, an exploration of audience reception for the hand-painted collection must uncover subjective and individual pathways of meaning-making for each individual. This individual pathway, as I shall explore throughout this chapter, is unique to each audience member and it responds to their lived experience, corporeal and sensory knowledge and memories.

In this chapter, I will conclude the case for the interdisciplinary reading of the hand-painted films by reconsidering the nature of the reception of the hand-painted works. I will draw heavily on the expanded notions of reception within performance art to develop a participative and performative understanding of audience experience for the hand-painted collection. This chapter will particularly highlight the decades of the 1960s and 1970s for the crucial developments in active audience participation in performance, which I will demonstrate are crucial areas of interest for the performative method of reception available for the hand-painted collection.

### **The limitations of film reception studies**

I have argued that the hand-painted collection should be relocated out of a merely filmic setting. As a result, the relevance of film reception alone is already questionable in terms of a new reception method for Brakhage's second-stage works. It is therefore unsurprising that the current landscape of film reception studies offers severely limited opportunities for the much-needed reception process I outlined above. However, it is important to acknowledge the significant developments in reception studies across the medium of film. There have

been numerous explorations into audience experience in relation to Hollywood film, such as Fan Study theories by Henry Jenkins, Constance Penley and Lisa A. Lewis, to name a few. More pertinent to this thesis are the developments within the avant-garde and independent cinema, particularly critics interested in the phenomenology of the lived experience of audience members, including Vivian Sobchack and Laura Marks. Both scholars have argued for greater exploration of the embodied materiality of film images with regard to the perception and lived experience of audience members, emphasising the multi-sensory, reflective and reflexive qualities of film. However, in their approaches, the writings of both Sobchack and Marks demonstrate the significance of the objective and representative quality of film, an unhelpful approach for the hand-painted works. This encourages the signification and the dominance of semiotics in film images: the visual world created on screen makes sense because of its similarities and resemblance to the material world we live in. As a result, embodied perception and sensory memory enable the film world to not only make sense, but to draw viewers in to the film world as a form or concept of reality.

As Sobchack explains,

In the film experience, because our consciousness is not directed towards our own bodies but towards the film's world, we are caught up with a thought (because our thoughts are 'elsewhere') in this vacillating and reversible sensual structure that *both* differentials *and* connected the sense of my literal body to the sense of the figurative bodies and objects I see on the screen (2004, p. 77).

As a result, the ability of film to reflect the material qualities of the physical world enable audience members to relate their own lived experience to the images presented to them through the 'film world', even if the literary narrative of the film plays with or disrupts the believability of this world in relation to our own. Marks labels this as 'attentive recognition', where "a perceiver oscillates between seeing the object, recalling visual images that it brings to memory, and comparing the virtual object thus created with the one before us" (2000, p. 48). This is so important as the system of signifiers within film communication enables meaning to reside in the film as object. "Cinema is capable of [...] discovering the value that inheres in objects: the discursive layers that take material from in them, the unresolved traumas that become embedded in them, and the history of material interactions that they encode (2000, p. 80). Marks argues that this meaning is encoded within objects through physical contact and, whilst this contact relates to individual and subjective knowledge, it draws upon the shared commonality all audience members have of living within, and experiencing, the materiality of the physical environment. Consequently, whilst the subjective experiences and meanings of audience members can impact the film experience,



the objective reading available through representation in the film, or the film as text, dominates the experience offered.

Therefore, whilst of great interest to the sensory and reflective capabilities of film, this method of film reception is unhelpful for Brakhage's second stage works. To briefly reiterate my argument in Chapter Four, the lack of camera images, or representation of the physical environment (including objects and people) in the hand-painted works prevents such subjective, embodied knowledge to exist within the films as objects. The abstract qualities of the works offer no common shared lived experience, as they do not reflect the physical environment that hosts all such lived experience for audience members. Additionally, this lack of representation and, thus, literary narrative, prevents the redirection of consciousness towards the 'other' kind of world in film, as Sobchack described. This reduces the empathetic experience with the onscreen world and provides a more unique opportunity for film to draw greater attention to the true lived body in its present state of experiencing through the artwork. The hand-painted works are thus more interested in the direct audience experience of the artwork, rather than the signified meaning reflected through the film as a representational object.

A reception theory for the hand-painted works therefore needs to study this direct and empirical audience experience without the shared commonality of the representational qualities of the film world. This means instigating a key change that draws attention away from the filmmaker and/or film product as object, which continues to dominate current film reception theory. Instead, attention needs to be focused on the subjective audience experiences that are emphasised as a result of the lack of objective and representation 'reading' of the film as text. This change involves increasing the status and appreciation of audience experience, particularly in relation to their role in the process and flow of communication and, thus, meaning. As Jeff Kelley indicates, this has not historically rested with the audience. He wrote: "[C]ommunication tends to flow in one direction, from the artist through a medium towards an audience. We the audience find we've been 'communicated' to, and what has been communicated to us is something of the artist's creative experience." (1996, p. xvii). Predictably, this has resulted in a passive understanding of the role of the audience. This flow of communication does not work for the hand-painted works, as I have argued throughout this thesis. Brakhage's production experience is not available for audience members and cannot be communicated through the abstract artworks alone. Consequently, the hand-painted works require an understanding of reception as a *process*,

where meaning has not been pre-determined. If objective understanding, experience or meaning cannot exist prior to the moment of reception (because of the lack of objective and representative signification in the images) then the moment of reception itself is a crucial area of study. The first moment of direct contact with audiences provides the space and opportunity for subjective reception experiences to be born, enabling the abstract qualities of the work to be experienced differently depending on the different personalities (and thus lived experience) that make contact with the art. This, in itself, draws attention to and increases the significance of the audience as a direct and active party within the reception process. Their participation impacts the meaning of the artwork that takes place as a direct result of the participation process. This notion of reception as process has developed most within the field of performance, broadening the interdisciplinary parameters of this study into the hand-painted collection. Developing this line of thought, a performative approach to reception through the notion of process, will be the primary focus throughout the rest of this chapter.

### **Performance and reception developments**

The development of reception studies within performance practice academia has provided an increased role for the audience- something currently lacking in film reception theory. Within the parameters and makeup of performance, a fundamental, epistemic shift has occurred to a much greater degree than in other art media: the understanding of performance as an ephemeral and ever-changing process. This directly contrasts with the traditional expectation of art as a physical and concrete object, as I have demonstrated through conventional film reception. Through the rise of performance *events* and the ever-increasing participative roles of audiences in performance, the impact of audience presence, engagement and activity has led to a heightened interest in direct and empirical reception developments, from a practical and academic perspective.

As early as the 1980s, performance scholars, such as Willmar Sauter, realised that “not every spectator experiences the same theatrical performance in the same way” and he began to question “what created the differences?” (2000, p. 2). In contrast to the structuralist concept of semiotics, reception studies began to move towards a phenomenological notion of “empirical reception studies” due to the acknowledgement that “spectators do not perceive ‘signs’ which they describe and interpret for a scholar; they perceive ‘meaning’” (Sauter, 2000, p.3). This has led to greater focus on understanding and uncovering first-person experience, as understood through the phenomenological concept of *lived- experience*. In

the late twentieth century, performance scholarship continued to expand these themes of reception, resulting in a great many practical and academic explorations of reception with performance. Martin Barker alone noted the publication of 400 studies into audiences between the 1980 and early noughties (2006, p. 124). Reception academia has therefore become an acknowledged and celebrated area of research within performance which has, in turn, enabled practitioners and scholars to begin addressing more complex issues surrounding audience research. One pertinent issue for this study has been how to obtain qualitative audience research to evidence and expand this highly subjective and individual response to performance.

This qualitative approach to reception in performance re-addresses the ambiguities of the audience as a single entity with a singular experience. With less focus on objective meaning (contained or delivered through an art object), performance reception has renewed interest in the role of the audience as an active part of the art process. This has consequently drawn attention to the actual perceptions of audience members of a performance, breaking down the regular assumption of the audience as one entity or body, who have been communicated to and have received the same, objective reading. Such attention has revealed that “[T]he audience is ever-present speculatively [...] but- despite their persistent presence- they are rarely confronted directly in a meaningful way” (Bucknall, 2017, p. 2). As a result, there has been increased interest in interacting directly with audience members. This has encouraged researchers to “engage with a variety of audiences” (Referencing Barker in Wood, 2015, p. 33). This has subsequently led to an examination of the vocabulary used to examine the role of the audience. The concept of ‘witnessing’ has been increasingly used to accentuate the individualised and corporeal lived experience that is at the heart of an audience experience. Unlike more passive terms, such as ‘viewing’ or ‘spectating’, “witness[ing] an event is to present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one’s own place in them, even if that place is simply, for the moment, as an onlooker” (Etchells, 1999, p. 17). An audience member as witness is directly involved in the performance as event, their experience is acknowledged as significant to the wider performance. Despite the vast increase of, and impressive developments in, audience reception theory in performance, there are still significant areas of growth that need to take place in performance theory. Barker admits there is a “still-persistent tendency to singularize ‘the audience’ without ever looking at or talking to any actual people” (2006, p. 124). Similarly, in many instances performance reception theory is still tackling many of the key problems currently overshadowing audience experience. For example, Joanna Bucknall and Kirsty Sedgeman

reaffirm Helen Freshwater's perspective that "people who make and study live events tend to 'prefer discussing their own responses, or relaying the opinions of reviewers, to asking 'ordinary audience members'" (p118). This not only confirms the existence and reliance on the auteur perspective, but also that of a professional and formal reception hierarchy, largely made up of professional critics, scholars and fellow performance artists. There is therefore, a continuing need for further developments in performance reception practices and studies; to, crucially, enable audience empowerment and significance on a direct and personal level. It is in this way that greater insights into subjective, personal and embodied reception knowledge can be achieved.

For Brakhage's hand-painted works, a performative approach to reception has a lot to offer. As this thesis has argued extensively, there is no objective experience of meaning available because of the lack of literary narrative, representational and photographic elements. This alone reduces the significance of Brakhage's perception as auteur, because, as I have argued, it is not available for audiences through the film (as object). Instead, the abstract qualities of the hand-painted works as products need an innovative approach to analysis that goes beyond a production-based or objective reading of art. Performance reception provides a critical new approach to meaning-making through the role of the audience. It extends the art process beyond merely the production by focusing on the moment of reception, the film screening, as an integral area of study. Championing the role and significance of audience members during the film screening process prioritises subjective audience experience. It disrupts the expectation of communication being passed down through Brakhage or through the stand-alone visuals of the films themselves, and suggests that audience members of a Brakhage hand-painted film are a crucial source of meaning-making. By considering the subjective experiences of audience members, the abstract visuals no longer become an obstacle (to objective reading) but an area of focus. The different ways in which they are experienced and perceived (assured *by* their abstract nature) would return the abstract visuals to concrete meaning, unique to every individual as it was also for Brakhage as their maker. However, this understanding of reception for the hand-painted works requires a significant epistemological change, as a direct result of the recommended interdisciplinary perspective.

#### *Performance- Participation, Liveness and Process*

Performance has been celebrated for the diversity and flexibility it has brought to the arts across a range of forms, media, and styles. Performance, as a concept, remains broad and

unrestricting but has regularly expanded or explored areas outside of conventional narration through the significance of live action, performers and process. In defining performance, or the broadness of performance, RoseLee Goldberg offers the following succinct definition:

By its very nature, performance defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that it is live art by artists. Any stricter definition would immediately negate the possibility of performance itself. For it draws freely on any number of disciplines and media- literature, poetry, theatre, music, dance, architecture and painting, as well as video, film, slides and narrative- for material, deploying them in any combination (1995, p. 9).

As Goldberg illustrates, performance regularly involves media known for their narrative tendencies. However, the significance of liveness across performance has regularly empowered both artists and audiences without drawing upon traditional semiotics and representation (notions of which the hand-painted works also need to escape). Instead performance has explored the live process of the event (the duration of reception) as a primary and active opportunity for experience. This does not mean that narrative is not present, in many instances it is, but instead literary narrative or representation is regularly subservient to the primary nature of performance- the experience of performer(s) and/or audience as part of the live process. This is significant in identifying the shift away from the fascination with art as 'completed' product and onto the nature of art as process which, simultaneously, heightens the significance of audiences within the signification process. For David E.R George, performance promotes the possibilities of experience within the performance space, as a significant outcome of the medium. Without literary narrative, "[P]erformers and spectators are returned instead to the primacy of experience in its first sense- that of experimenting with other ways worlds might be thought of, and made, and acted in." (1999, p. 30). This challenges one of the crucial aims of art, moving away from controlled meaning communicated to audiences, to the creation of an exciting and dynamic space for a variety of experiences, perceptions and creative activities. George continues,

In contemporary performance, the spectator may be deprived of narrative and hence of narrative hypotheses, they may be deprived of characters too; they may have only the performer to follow: 'how does one make sense of it?' people ask, assuming that 'making sense' is what they are trying to do. Perhaps they aren't: there are better places than the theatre to make sense of the world but very few which offer such unique experiences (1999, p. 29).

This regular deprivation of narrative, or what I understand as conventional or literary narrative, for the spectator within the field of performance is therefore of great value to the reception of the hand-painted works. Instead of enforcing objective meaning and knowledge, located in the art object itself, a performative understanding of reception offers audiences of the hand-painted work a corporeal and ephemeral art experience, which is

integral to the subjective and localised meaning that develops as a result of engaging in the live process. This draws attention to the live presence of the audience during the process of the performance. It is only during the screening event, for Brakhage's hand-painted works, that both the concrete art object and the live audience members co-exist within the same space, enabling the *act* of reception to take place. The performative element of the screening therefore demonstrates the screening event as ephemeral, existing only in the live moment.

### **An Interdisciplinary Framing of Performance: Cage, Happenings and the influential 1960s**

Considering a performative approach to reception for the hand-painted works offers an essential critical frame for developing a new and relevant interdisciplinary understanding of audience experience. As I explored in Chapters Three and Four, the development of a visual narrative for the hand-painted works is a crucial step towards identifying the key elements and themes of the works that are available for meaningful exploration by the audience. The result of this visual narrative and reception process is the creation of individual and unique subjective experience. However, greater understanding of the reception of the works, and thus the experiences of individuals who view them, is critical.

A twenty-first century perspective of performance reception has developed greatly in contrast to that available in the 1970s and 1980s, when the hand-painted works were first produced. Comparing the films to today's notion of performance is a daunting task, as approaches to participation and active audience experience have extensively developed and become an accepted part of performance's identity. However, the emergence and development of performative and participative audience reception in the second half of the twentieth century offers key areas of interest for a new and active approach to reception for the second-stage works. The development of performance, and performance art as a discipline, particularly in North America, in the 1960s, shifted the role of the audience in a localised and empirical way, as I will demonstrate. This decade documents a monumental change in the philosophy of reception through the pioneering and experimental ideas that were explored and tested, which led to the increasing importance of the audience. This era was crucial in the build-up of performative ideas that have led to the extensive development of performance as a broad and diverse arena of practice today. Exploring the *development* of these performative approaches within this period of history is fundamental to understanding how such techniques can be applied to the hand-painted collection as a new area of study. It is also particularly key in understanding the concept of interdisciplinary in the arts. As I argued in Chapter Four, interdisciplinary has become an unclear and over-used term. The extensive

and diverse amount of performance literature has made it difficult to underpin the concept of interdisciplinary art. As a result, the term has become vague and unhelpful. However, I intend to build on my understanding of interdisciplinary art (p112-113) through an exploration of the mind-set of the 1960s, which I will suggest can be understood as the original site for the emergence of interdisciplinary performance. The 1960s are well-documented as an active and thriving era for avant-garde art. The period was born out of crucial schools of thought already taking place across the arts, most particularly the transformation of painting through the movement of Abstract Expressionism (from p83). Anticipating many performative qualities, painters, such as Jackson Pollock, had already started to “shift the global emphasis in art from the object- a representation of experience- to the *process* of producing that object.” (Frieling, Groys, Atkins et al., 2008, p, 51). However, I will frame the initial performative focus on reception with the work of influential theoretician, philosopher and musician John Cage. His work provided the basis for both an interdisciplinary and performative art environment.

#### *John Cage- Inspiring a New School of Performative Practice*

To quote David Revill, “[W]hether one agrees with his ideas or appreciates his art, anyone interested in the culture of the twentieth century, its philosophy, sociology and history, needs to know about John Cage.” (1992, p. 4). Cage was instrumental to the influential interdisciplinary art concepts of the 1960s through both his theories and practical artworks. These were most famously shared through his classes at Rutgers University, which brought a community of artists together across art disciplines. Foregrounding the breakdown of Modernist movements in art, Cage’s influence in both predicting and inducing the diverse interdisciplinary nature of performance is a critical area of focus. His most prolific musical composition, *4’33”* (1952) empowered the role of the audience further than ever before, making them the subject of the art and forcing participation upon them as a main element of the available art experience. Their own sounds and noises, in addition to the musical qualities of silence, were understood as a vital part of the musical composition. Cage’s act of relinquishing authority displayed his “intent on making something that didn’t tell people what to do” (Frieling, Groys, Atkins et Al., 2008, p. 82). This subjective approach to meaning in the work also continued to empower the philosophical status of the art process. Functioning “as a theoretical extension of the ready-made: it is an object defined by its context, but its meaning is updated, even renewed, whenever it is experienced.” (Robinson, 2009, p. 82). This laid crucial groundwork for the significance of subjective meaning,

empowering audiences with the role of meaning-making rather than artists or performers. Each performance is therefore considered a different event and process, experienced by different people at a different point in time (this continued to develop across performance art in the next few decades as I will soon demonstrate).

Cage's thoughts and musical artworks also inspired interdisciplinary progression. Both resonated with artists across a variety of media and were most keenly felt by artists outside of music. Cage himself noted his supporters were generally made up of painters and sculptors, rather than fellow musicians (Sandford, 1995, p. 67). He felt artists outside the medium of music recognised the wider implications of his theories, developing them in other art forms. The results of these critical art theories led to artists from different media coming together, educating each other, sharing ideas and working in collaborative partnerships. These partnerships led to new concepts of art that blurred the lines between existing arts and connected art media in ways that had previously never been attempted. Even artists themselves escaped being defined through their medium, needing "no longer say, 'I am a painter' or 'a poet' or 'a dancer.' They are simply 'artists.' All of life will be open to them." (Kelley [Ed.], 1996, p. 9). This marked the early formation of interdisciplinary practice as post-modern slippage, forging novel connections between the arts and breaking down the previously rigid boundaries and definition of media. As a result, the "pluralism of the sixties [had] dissolved all boundaries. Or, if you like, the boundary is everywhere" (Jacob, Bass, 2007, p. 23).

The inspiring practices and schools of thought started by John Cage were felt keenly across the arts, including in avant-garde film. Brakhage's own personal interest in music made Cage's teachings relevant to his filmmaking. Whilst it is known that Brakhage knew Cage (Cage to Chairman of Sub-Committee on Film Studies, April 27, 1970), the extent of his inspiring practices on Brakhage's own works can only be inferred. As I have explored within my thesis so far, Brakhage had great artistic interest across many disciplines, particularly across music, which I have argued is manifested in the interdisciplinary qualities of the hand-painted works, and as such can be linked to this influential shift in the 1960s. However, moving away from Brakhage's influence, Cage's prolific cultural legacy is of particular interest for a performative understanding of reception of the hand-painted films. In addition to sharing the interdisciplinary qualities available across the art community, Cage drew attention to the participative process and role of audiences available within a traditional art medium, music. His innovative work encouraged artists across other art disciplines to



empower the role of the audience, bringing participative practices to other media. In essence, Cage's scholarship and practices instigated a key interdisciplinary revolution in performative practice. Without his inspiring interdisciplinary theories and philosophies, the discipline of performance and, thus, audience reception across performance, might not have received such critical attention. Whilst Cage is crucial to the start of this revolt on objective meaning, it was the movement of performance that it inspired that is so crucial to a method of reception for the hand-painted works.

### *The 'Roaring' Sixties: Happenings and Fluxus*

Cage's performative theories of music were advanced through the birth of Happenings and Fluxus across the 1960s. Both terms came about as a direct result of Cage's famous class on musical composition at the New School for Social Research in New York between 1957 and 1959. Participants of this class came from a diverse range of art backgrounds, and many became influential figures in the next decade, including George Brecht, George Maciunas, Dick Higgins and Allen Kaprow, to name a few. Both terms, Happenings and Fluxus, were coined by members of this class (the former by Kaprow in 1958 and the latter by Maciunas in 1961). They advocated a new performative exploration of the arts, where audience members were given greater involvement and significance than ever before. In fact, the term 'Happening' was meant as "a neutral name for an event or performance" (Frieling, Groys, Atkins et al., 2008, p. 89), permitting a range of live activities to take place. This was deeply significant in moving attention away from the literary story of artwork (as finished product) and instead drawing attention to the live moment of reception as part of the significance of the art and art experience. Unlike Abstract Expressionism, which drew attention to the art process retrospectively, both were pioneering in bringing the performative process to the audience directly through the liveness of the event, offering them a genuine (and active) experience of the art process, therefore blurring the line between art experience and living experience. Accordingly, both Happenings and Fluxus marked a substantial shift in the signification focus within the twentieth century from the art object (which included the meaning depicted from an authorial perspective by the artist) to that of the audience. Meaning was no longer considered objective and something to be communicated, instead the process and experience of encountering art became the central focus, emphasising subjective and empirical reception experience. Such projects "might ask participants to contribute text to the walls of an installation or move furniture around a room" as a direct

opportunity for participation and engagement (Frieling, Groys, Atkins et al., [Ed.], 2008, p. 102).

The distinction between Happenings and Fluxus is hard to define due to the broadness of both concepts, which is instrumental to their identities. They are regularly considered conjointly as art experiences that highlight the ordinary, everyday experiences as special occasions, events and sometimes objects whilst denouncing the authorial control of the artist, communicating their message to the masses. Hannah Higgins quotes Jean-Jacques Lebel in acknowledging their difference:

Anyone who recognizes the formidable, libidinal, polytechnical, multidirectional and often 'delayed-action' uprising of the Sixties and especially the people who lived this experience- can hardly be surprised [at seeing] Fluxus and Happenings grouped as a subject of a single manifestation. After all, Fluxus and Happenings were contemporaneous- Happenings surfacing only slightly earlier- and a good many artists swam happily in both of the currents of this great stream. The difference, finally, if there is a difference, lies in their programmatic intentions (2002, p. 110).

This programmatic intention, for Higgins, revolves around the political agenda often connected to [George] Maciunas, a founding member of Fluxus. However, the concept of Fluxus extends beyond Maciunas alone and generally the distinction seems to be unclear. Both Happenings and Fluxus shared similarities in their explorations, experiences and processes, but neither were movements as they inspired a much wider understanding of art that came to be fully realised through performance. Happenings and Fluxus inspired and encouraged vividly different approaches to art, making them purposefully difficult to define either as concepts, instead suggesting similar attitudes and intentions. As Higgins, daughter of Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, writes, "The artists came from almost every industrialized nation, they span several generations, and many even dislike each other. Accurately portraying Fluxus therefore requires thinking about art in a way that foregoes the normally definitive terms of style, medium and political sensibility." (Higgins, 2002, p. xiii). As a result, it is unsurprising that Fluxus and Happenings demonstrated crucial interdisciplinary links. As Elizabeth Armstrong and Joan Rothfuss highlight, "Fluxus was also a boundary phenomenon in that it located its experiments on the thresholds between different arts and media: between music and poetry, design and poetry, music and graphics, music performance and theater performance, vaudeville and high art, art and life" (1993, p. 149). This all draws attention to the flexible nature of Fluxus and Happenings, encompassing, as a result, a wide range of forms, styles experiments and media. This flexibility is crucial to this study as it demonstrates the broad and encompassing nature of post-modernism that confronted the need to categorise and label art. The broad nature of Fluxus and Happenings encouraged a

bespoke focus on each event as unique in itself. The ways in which forms were embedded, styles were included or boundaries were crossed was a critical part of each Fluxus or Happening. The post-modernist and interdisciplinary qualities of Fluxus and Happenings are instrumental to the development of performative practices across the twentieth century. They crucially re-defined the role of audiences by offering a new, participative and active experience that tested the practices, expectations and behaviours of audience members in a new and playful way. The audience became the heart of the process, their experience provided the meaning during the live event, forcing a new approach to art outside the notion of art as completed product and also of authorial communication. However, most importantly, all of this was achieved within an interdisciplinary framework, that included explorations and hybrid relationships between film, poetry, painting and music- making its practices accessible across all media, and relevant to the hand-painted films.

Fluxus and Happenings therefore offer critical opportunities to the hand-painted works in light of this study's post-modernist and interdisciplinary approach to the collection. The multidisciplinary culture of the 1960s not only reflected Brakhage's own interdisciplinary interests and perceptions, but connects critically to the visual narrative. The significance of paint, music and film to the visual narrative demonstrates the interdisciplinary qualities of the works themselves. This agrees with my own understanding of interdisciplinary art (see Chapter Four), arguing for a specific form of analysis to ascertain the individual and unique characters of each example of interdisciplinary art. In this way, the experimental, interdisciplinary identity of Fluxus and Happenings can also be considered in the hand-painted style, which can further suggest a post-modernist approach towards the collection. By identifying the works within the broad, encompassing concept of interdisciplinary performance, the hand-painted works can be considered in a new light, outside of the modernist labels (see Chapter One) that have prevented a consideration of the works outside of modernist, avant-garde film. This positioning is highly important in paving the way for a performative approach towards the hand-painted works. In order to achieve this, a further examination of Happenings and Fluxus is needed, which should consider four central themes that promote a performative reception process. These themes include: process over product, implications of authorship, the participative role of audience members and the overarching significance of liveness.

### *Process over product*

Prior to the performative 1960s, and the crucial initiation of process over product in American Abstract Expressionism, the art product as object had long been the central focus of art. In Chapter Two I explored in detail Brakhage's production experience of the hand-painted films. Throughout Chapters Three and Four I have argued why this production experience is not applicable for audiences on its own, as the highly personal and subjective experiences that inspired the artworks cannot be understood through the abstract visuals alone. This served to highlight a necessary divide between the paths of art production and reception. Traditionally, across a range of media, these two experiences are expected to take place at different times and places: the artist in the moment of production- regularly a private and less visible stage- and the audience, once the production of the art object had been completed and is ready to be 'received'. At this point the moment of reception is commonly used to celebrate and analyse the completion of the object and the success of the artist's intended meaning. This once again returns to the gap highlighted by John Dewey (see Chapter Two). To remind us, Dewey argued that, "[S]ince 'artistic' refers primarily to the act of production and 'esthetic' to that of perception and enjoyment, the absence of a term designating the two processes taken together is unfortunate." (2005, p. 48). Happenings and Fluxus broke this division of experience, bringing the spheres of production and reception together, into direct contact, and into the same space. Not only did they co-exist in the space, both production and reception were required within the live moment of performance. This cyclical relationship (where artist needed audience and vice versa) provided a fundamental emphasis on the notion of art as *process*. The moment of reception became a key part of the creative journey. Different, often interdisciplinary, elements of an event came together within the moment of performance- the impact of which was often unknown and unexpected by most of the performers themselves. The sheer range of activities and events that could take place, for example, within one happening ensured that the final creative art experience was only available during the live performance itself. This meant the artistic process of production shared the same space as the audience's engagement with the piece. RoseLee Goldberg highlights the wealth of activity occurring in *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, a famous and early happening produced by Allan Kaprow in 1959. As she describes, "Flute, ukulele and violin were played, painters painted on unprimed canvases set into the walls, gramophones were rolled in on trolleys", resulting in "ninety minutes of eighteen simultaneous happenings" (1995, p. 130). The different activities within the overall happening did not "relate to one another in a traditional sense" (Meyer-Hermann, Perchuck,

Rosenthal [Ed.], 2008, p. 17), enabling audience members to dictate their own path through the simultaneous activities. The live presence of the audience in this busy performance space had been designed to develop, change and evolve the Happening. Fluxus and Happenings promoted audience engagement, providing opportunities for them to change the result of the process. For example, George Brecht's *Towards Events* (1959) suggested "the art is to become actively rather than passively existent, to be enjoyed as an unfolding experience. There are constructions to be hung on the walls as a painting, but whose elements may be moved about by the viewer in a manner determined by the nature of the work" (Robinson, 2009, p. 88). The artist no longer dictated the nature of the final art experience, the art was not presented as completed product and therefore no meaning could be communicated to audiences. Instead, audience members actively engaged, shaped and changed the art through the reception process, providing a unique and subjective experience for both artist and audience within each individual performance.

Fluxus demonstrated a different path for the creative process through the development of the Fluxkit, an object often privately experienced by individual audience members. "[E]ach fluxkit was a separate assembly of items, with a number of constant factors: an attaché case or a wooden box with a silkscreened label, compartmentalized to contain from twenty to forty or more individual items (event scores, texts, and a selection of plastic Fluxboxes" (Armstrong, Rothfuss, 1993, p. 54). Fluxkits often included different items and objects in every example, meaning the kit could never offer up the same experience to different audience members. Additionally, whilst the fluxkit was essentially a pre-prepared object, the product itself was not the focus of the art experience. The performative and experiential quality of the fluxkit was only made possible through the active participation of an audience member. Each individual example of engagement would be a unique performative process and all elements of the experience were dictated by the individual. They had control over what, how and when the experience took place. Each instance of engagement was only complete in that moment and for that audience member. For the fluxkit as object, the process of performance was continuous, each different investigation by audience members marked the start and completion of engagement in that instance, creating, in the process, subjective and unique art experiences that could not be replicated and could be experienced anew with each encounter. The fluxkit emphasised the lack of objective, representational value preconceived in the objects themselves. The objects held no meaning to be communicated to each audience member, instead it offered potential for play and exploration. Higgins offers an example of a pom-pom as 'actual stuff' present in a fluxkit,

explaining “it is not *about* a pom-pom unless a particular user proceeds down that path of association” (2002, p. 36). As a result, the fluxkit drew attention to the active engagement of audience members with the objects, empowering individuals with the ability to dictate and complete the art process as they wished. Through this experience “the Fluxkit produces sensate forms of knowledge [...] allow[ing] us to experience things for ourselves” (2002, p. 37). This highlights the cycle of production and reception through the event, it is not until both the object and the audience meet that the performance takes place. This experience, and the meaning gained from it, cannot be predicted pre-performance, the meaningful opportunities arise directly from the connection and explorations that happen at the live moment of the event.

Both examples within Fluxus and Happenings therefore demonstrate the importance of the performative event, where audiences engage with art as a process waiting to be encountered. In each example, the art is not considered to be ‘complete’ until it has come into contact with, and been changed through, the audience experience. Furthermore, the concept of the ‘complete’ artwork is also treated tentatively, as the experience has been designed to change with the various interactions of different audience members. The absence of completed creative experience (on behalf of the artist) prior to audience engagement, results in the fundamental creation of new experiences with each performance- the experience and involvement of the audience in each instance must impact the nature of each art experience. Therefore, the process is, in reality, never complete but constantly in flux- it provides new opportunities and new meanings for each individual involved in the process. As a result, the art object or performance can only ever be active in the live moment of reception. Prior to this, or in between moments of activity, the absence of audience engagement results in the art (or object) returning to a dormant state. It continues to offer a pregnant site for potential meaning, however this can only be realised through further contact with an audience.

This constant state of flux within the process reframes the everyday experience, led by audience members, as art. To return to Cage, “You say: the real, the world as it is. But it is not, it becomes! It moves, it changes! ... You are getting closer to this reality when you say... it ‘presents itself’: that means that it is not there, existing as an object. The world, the real is not an object. It is a process” (Cage quoted in Armstrong, Rothfuss, 1993, p66). The prominence of the art process across the 1960s therefore reflected the ever-changing and evolving process of living within the world, drawing attention to the possible connections

between art and everyday life. In a similar vein to 4'33", the art process activates audience members as co-creators of the art experience and, thus, its meaning. The audience become witnesses to the event which, in turn, requires their experience in order for meaning to be created.

### *Implications of authorship*

The importance of authorship was intrinsically impacted by the significance of process over product across Happenings and Fluxus, as the shift of signification to the role of the audience placed emphasis on the process of making and experiencing art rather than the art object. By relinquishing full control over the art process, and instead purposefully providing a space for subjective and meaningful audience engagement, the 1960s art culture promoted the significance of the audience's role as witness and performer, whilst shifting attention from the productive role and authorial perspectives of artists. This revolution occurred because of the philosophical perspectives of artists within this period, who welcomed the participation and activation of audiences as co-creators of the performances. Kaprow's thought-process, which led to such a transformation to his own authorship within his happenings, is demonstrated through his own writing. Tracing inspiration from Abstract Expressionism, he explained:

I developed a kind of action-collage technique, following my interest in [Jackson] Pollock. These action-collages, unlike my constructions, were done as rapidly as possible by grasping great hunks of varied matter: tinfoil, straw, canvas, photos, newspaper, etc... [...] These parts projected further and further from the walls and into the room, and included more and more audible elements... I immediately saw that every visitor to the environment was part of it... I offered him more and more to do until there developed the Happening (2002, p. 105).

Inviting audience members to be prominent in the art process subsequently diminished the power and control of the artists, as authors, over the performance. Therefore, the result of Kaprow's happenings, in terms of the meaningful experiences created, were unknown to himself as artist prior to the event- enabling himself as artist to experience the performance (and process) anew. Due to the ephemerality of the live moment of performance, only available through the unknown role played by the audience, Kaprow could experience the process as both artist and, to an extent, as audience. This transformation of roles is summarised pertinently by Cage's statement that "We used to have the artist up on a pedestal. Now he's no more extraordinary than we are" (1985, p. 50). As a result, performance continued to move away from the concept of art as a completed object, diminishing the role of traditional narrative and representation in terms of the meaning offered, and the role of audiences in co-creating such meaning. As a result, the rejection of

the artist as auteur within this period demonstrates the ability of audiences of the hand-painted films to be directly involved as co-creators of meaning within the works.

An even greater example for the hand-painted collections lies within an exploration of the fluxfilms. Many fluxfilms also used abated authorship to revolutionise audience experience, even through more traditional art production methods. Fluxfilms are therefore of relevance to this study of the hand-painted films due to their traditional filmic location, within the framework of a wider happening, that still enable audiences to co-create meaningful experiences of the work. *End after 9* (1966) was a fluxfilm made by George Maciunas, which clearly demonstrates the difference between the artistic philosophies of happening and fluxus artists in comparison to Brakhage's more traditional avant-garde film community. *End after 9*, in a near Brechtian manner, is virtually described through its title- "the title not only predicts the content but, in a comic reversal of the relationship between text and title, also makes up the main portion of the film, which ends after a split-second montage of the numbers one through nine" (Armstrong, Rothfuss, 1993, p. 125). In a similar fashion to the fluxkit, *End after 9* offers little visual or representational narrative within the film object itself- instead, the fluxfilm challenges stereotypical film viewing, even across the avant-garde by defying the visual poetics or detailed narratives found elsewhere across the medium of film. Reflecting more futurist techniques, the fluxfilm encourages audiences to question its artistic relevance and significance in order to engage audience members in a more active role. It is worth noting another example, albeit "less formal but more parodic in its humorous assault on the poetic impulse", in Dick Higgins' *Invocations of Canyons and Boulders for Stan Brakhage* (1963). This fluxfilm directly parodies Brakhage's camera works through approximately twenty seconds of film showing different close-ups of a man chewing. Whilst this work clarifies the tensions and differences between fluxus artists and avant-garde filmmakers, it nevertheless demonstrates the desire for a participative and active audience role through more traditional filmic means.

One of the most substantial results of this changed status of authorship is the relationship this promotes between artist and audience. Unlike Jeff Kelley's earlier quote, the direction of communication is no longer linear, from artist to audience. As a result, the potential agency of the signification within the art process becomes more diverse and flexible: "*Who controls the definition of art- the artist, curator, critic, or viewer- is no longer the question. Art is now a contested site defined collectively by all of these actors, each of who must*



surrender a measure of authorial control.” (Frieling, Groys, Atkins, Manovich (Ed.), 2008, p. 33).

### *Audience Participation*

Audience participation within the performative era of the 1960s is one of the most crucial aspects to explore for this study. By analysing the significance of the art process, and the relinquished authorial control common across Happenings and Fluxus, my focus on this area of performance history has intended to demonstrate the changed role that has occurred for audience members. This has suggested a more active, creative and direct involvement for audiences within the art process, with the ability to impact the reception of the art process and experience in a critical way. Of course, it is important to once again return to the broad and diverse nature of both happenings and fluxus: examples of art across the decade vary considerably in many ways, including the level of audience participation and interaction involved. Whilst the level and/or manner varies from piece to piece, the essence of audience participation, regardless of the extent, demonstrates a fundamental shift in the ontology of the audience’s role.

Therefore, an important question to explore through performative events of this era is what is understood by audience participation? More broadly, throughout performance scholarship of the twentieth and twenty first century, this has become a fairly contested question with a diverse number of contrasting responses. As Nicky Hamlyn identifies, the word itself promotes the significance of activity. In comparison to other audience terminology (‘spectator’, ‘viewer’) that suggest passivity within reception, performance work “remedies this by empowering the spectator through active participation” (2003, p. 156). Hamlyn identifies the difference between passive and active audience engagement in the changes made to the performance environment: “by modifying or affecting an existing structure or environment, rather than just contemplating it, the spectator becomes a creative participant, actively involved in shaping the outcome of the work, and so becomes a kind of artist in his/ her own right.” (2003, p. 155).

Clear methods of participation demonstrated through fluxus and happenings commonly revolved around the physical movement of audience members within the event space. In their empowered role, audience members were able to touch or physically alter the space, verbally and/or physically interact or engage in the art or even become the central focus of the event itself. George Brecht played a crucial part in the regularity of such participative

techniques through his creation of the Event score, a process that was often taken up as part of a fluxus or happening event. The premise of the event card was simple: a “white card with a few lines of text, it was a linguistic proposition presented in lieu of the art object, designed to mediate a moment of the spectator’s experience” (Robinson, 2009, p. 77). Event cards offered an effective method that dispelled the need for formal performers, more aptly encouraging audience members to become performative in their actions and experiences by taking up a greater level of activity within the event. In a similar fashion to the fluxkit, event cards, as passive, stand-alone objects, were pregnant of meaning within the art experience- inspiring and promoting audience participation only when actively explored by members of the audience.

A wider extension of the event card scenario, further testing the physical possibilities of participation, has subsequently become a regular premise of performance artwork. The art concept itself becomes a hypothetical scenario in which the audience are added amongst a set of specific parameters. An interesting example of this can be found in the performance piece *Great Suicides of our Time*, performed by the Jail Warehouse, a London- based performance group, in 1977. Although outside the most thriving era of happenings and fluxus, this performance depends entirely on the role of the audience and the participation of audience members in concluding the event:

The audience of about twenty is led outdoors in the dark, where, after being coerced into giving up their valuables- or at least a few coins- they are taken into a tiny abandoned shack where they sit around a table... [T]he spectators are offered a filthy meal of a hastily cooked hamburger and a watermelon that has been chopped to bits. When the banquet has been served, the performers leave the building, closing the door behind them. A pipe is inserted into a hole in the wall, and smoke begins to pour into the building. At first, the audience does nothing, expecting the performers to return. Finally a spectator goes to the door and tries to open it, but is it being held closed by someone on the outside. The audience begins to be somewhat concerned. They know they can open the door by force, but ‘they are reluctant to disrupt the performance.’ Eventually as the smoke becomes suffocating, several people force the door open, and the audience goes outside. It is no longer a performance (Inverso, 1996, p. 18).

This poignant example physically demonstrates the change of authorship between performer and audience, and emphasises the significance of participation within the overall process. Participation, and thus the acceptance of control, was necessary for the performance to conclude. As the audience leave the site of the performance, the art abruptly finishes, and everyday life ensues.

Many of the examples above evidence the physical role of participation within performative events. However, physical interaction is not necessarily a requirement of participation. It is

possible for audience members to participate in art through the mental and internal choices, thoughts or experiences that occur within the art process. This internal participation represents a choice on behalf of each audience member to engage with the work itself. However, the complexity of this internal participation is that it is an invisible part of the process, it cannot be outwardly seen or documented. Jeff Kelley writes, "Actual participation in a work of art courts anarchy. It invites the participant to make a choice of some kind. Usually that choice includes whether to participate. In choosing to participate, one may also be choosing to alter the work- its object its subject, its meaning" (1996, p. xviii). It is important that the performance provides audience members with such an invitation to participate, which is either refused, ignored or accepted/ acted upon. All of these outcomes are an act of participation as Rudolf Frieeling highlights in *The Art of Participation 1950 to now*: "Participatory art is an open invitation: the viewers' refusal to participate, or the participation of only a small number of people, counts as much as total physical engagement." (Frieeling, R., Groys, B, Atkins, R et al. (Eds.), 2008, p. 13).

As some of my earlier fluxus and happenings examples demonstrate, this invitation can provide an opportunity for internal, and potentially invisible, participation. The fluxkits can suggest physical interaction with the objects provided, in order to meaningfully experience the items in a personal and unique way. However, touch is only one sensory pathway: non-physical exploration of the objects can include visual, aural and/or olfactory sensory experiences, none of which require significant physical movement. To return to Higgins' example of the pom-pom, additional invisible sensory experience can be explored. Any internal perceptions of the pom-pom, for example reflections on the tactile quality of the material, can be an important part of an individual's experience, even with no evidence of physical touch within the live moment. The item itself does not dictate the art experience, the audience's exploration of the experience is the subject of the art process, which can be built from an exploration of the look, sound and smell of the art experience. Whilst the pom-pom itself will provide little aural or olfactory experience without movement from someone, the wider multisensory experiences of the environment within the art event may impact the personal and meaningful experience felt by a member of the audience. As Merleau-Ponty reminds us, through living in our physical bodies, the five senses are continuously embedded into our everyday experiences- we cannot separate those senses which receive stimulation elsewhere from the object on which we focus.

Another example of internal participation can be found through a more modern-day example of an fluxus event card that played part of Yoko Ono's *Cleaning Piece III* in 1996. The event card asked audience members to:

"Try to say nothing negative about anybody.

- a) For three days.
- b) For forty-five days
- c) For three months"

(*'Yoko Ono's Cleaning Piece May Change Your Life'*, 2015).

This asks audiences to engage in a mental act that requires reflective thought and invisible, mental action- to choose not to say anything negative about someone for a particular amount of time. The creative process that has been stimulated is an invisible yet conscious act- without actively choosing to participate, the suggested action has not occurred, participation has not been achieved and the event card remains pregnant and inactive. Whilst the lines of art and everyday action are further blurred in this example, it still offers an invisible mental construct of internal participation.

Having explored some of the limits of participation, it is also crucial to recognise the impacts of participation on corporeal audience experience. Importantly, audience participation is framed within happenings and fluxus as a crucial element of the performance. It is not just that audience participation is an interesting factor but that it is necessary for the performance to happen at all. Therefore, the role of audience members becomes more performative through participation. As Susan Kattwinkel explains, "[M]any of these performances simply wouldn't exist without an audience; it's not a matter of needing spectators, but of needing co-creators" (2003, p. x). This returns to the significance of the auteur. My previous analysis highlighted the submission of authorial control within performance in order to welcome audience participation. But the role of participation develops this further. By acknowledging audience members as 'co-creators', Kattwinkel extends the importance of the audience to a greater level, potentially of equal value to the artist and/or performers.

Through instigating audience participation, happenings and fluxus emphasised the actions, roles and experiences of individuals through the reception of the art process. Their choices, interactions, actions of engagement and the outcomes of their participation are only

significant to the performance overall, but also to the individual meanings and experiences that were lived and felt as a result. To confirm, the outcomes of audience participation offered vital change and/or development for both the art process, completed subjectively in that unique audience engagement, and for the individual themselves. Both have changed or been impacted in some way through the art process. Through such participation, Fluxus and Happenings of the 1960s can be seen to be “reflexive, drawing attention to itself as art, deferring meaning and therefore giving the spectators a voice in the creation of that performance.” (Kattwinkel, 2003, p. xiii). They can provide opportunity for reflexive participation, widening the parameters and the impact of the art itself to inflict real change of thought, perception or action. In doing this, performance has, through participation, truly offered the possibility for audience members to go on a journey of self-discovery. Michael Pagis describes the phenomenological and long-term impacts of this self-discovery through self-reflexivity. This involves “the conscious turning of the individual toward himself, simultaneously being the observing subject and the observed object, a process that includes both self-knowledge and self-monitoring” (2009, p. 266).

The result of such intensive opportunities for audience participation can further blur the line between audience member and performer, as audience participators become the core focus of the work. As Bennett explains, performances “have self-consciously sought the centrality of the spectator as subject of the drama, but as a subject who can think and act.” She calls this type of spectator a “productive and emancipated spectator” (1990, p. 1). This emancipation can be heightened through the increasing absence of performers or artists as part of the performance space. The absence of performers and/or artists in the performance space heightens the significance of audience participation, and extends the role of audience members further.

This can further blur the boundaries between audience experience in performance and an individual’s everyday experience. Performative acts that continue the role of participation outside of the technical parameters of the live performance (through their reflexive requirements) can spill over into the apparent separate stage of ‘every-day’ life. Yoko Ono’s *Cleaning Piece III* illustrates this reflexive reception experience outside of the performative event itself. The event card asked for (or inspired) long-term participation in the every-day thoughts, conversations and actions of individuals outside of the performative event itself. This can inspire extended outcomes beyond the performative site itself, “causing a simple walk in the woods to be enhanced by a new heightened awareness of every sight, every sound,

every smell, taste and texture (Higgins, 2002, p. 109). Consequently, the duration of the performance could be extended beyond its artistic boundaries into everyday life, with the intention of inspiring personal change or reflection in the wider world- or perhaps a greater level of perception to the participation occurring on a regular basis.

This concept of the emancipated spectator is crucial to the performative location of reception for the hand-painted works, as it addresses another issue born from its current filmic location. By identifying audience members as co-creators and providing an experience for self-discovery, participation offers an area of study for the role of audiences in light of the absent role of traditional narrative. Instead of drawing people into a 'film world', as I described at the start of this chapter, the lack of conventional narrative in the hand-painted works provides greater opportunity for audience members to be aware of their lived experience within the live process of the performance itself. This, in turn, offers greater opportunity for self-discovery and reflexive experience through the art process. I will further develop these thoughts later in this chapter, when I put forward a new approach to the reception of the hand-painted collection.

### *Liveness*

Whilst all the themes I've explored are significant, liveness is perhaps the overarching significant element of both happenings and fluxus, particularly in highlighting the role of the audience within the event space. The concept of liveness recognises the importance of the event itself, a specific moment in time and place that is experienced by audience members at the moment it occurs- the ephemerality of the art as process. Therefore, liveness celebrates the moment of these performative activities when all critical elements (e.g. venue, performers, artists, audience) are present and come together, and the art is created. As a result, liveness draws attention to the audience, as the unknown element of the performance event that cannot be accounted for before the moment itself. Through the participative role given to audience members, the live event is constantly in flux, with infinite possibilities that will be determined by the individuals who enter the space as audience members, and through their choices and actions in that space. Roberta Mock confirms,

A 'live performance', on the other hand, is one which is still happening and still has to happen. It includes the potential for change in its every moment of delivery through the dialectical processes which *need* to be experienced- via, for example, the body of the performer, the physical context of its venue, the relationship with the audience- in order to make it 'whole' (2000, p. 2).

Through the significance of liveness, performance in the 1960s offered crucial new modes of thought surrounding the presence of audience members in the space and the significance of the art process for audience experience- in contrast to previous reliance in many art media on literary narrative. Whilst literary story might still be relevant, the impact of liveness means that the presence of the audience, and the impact of their subjective and unique make-up, will always be key. This means that “the live comes to stand for a category completely outside representation” (Wurtzler quoted in Auslander, 1999, p. 3), as it focuses analysis on the live moment of reception as the critical source of the art.

Consequently, because of the audience, liveness in 1960s performance drew critical attention to reception as an integral part of the medium itself. Throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, the medium of performance has developed audience participation to further lengths, testing previous boundaries of audience action and roles. This was achievable because the interest in the live process of reception was initiated in a practical sense through both happenings and fluxus. Whilst across the other arts, the role of the audience has remained relatively unchanged, the live quality of performance has questioned the role of ‘audience’ and experimented with previous boundaries to empower audience members more than ever. The result is an artform that demonstrates clear interest in involving audience members intrinsically, and that empowers the individual experiences these individuals have of the performance. They have become more important than ever before in creating art and forcing attention on the moment of reception, where they engage and become part of the process. It is individual audience experiences that become both the subject of the art and the art itself, and it is only through exploring these individual experiences that the true meaning of art can be discussed. As Matthew Reason states, “The conceptual debate about what live performance is, invites exploration through the examination of actual descriptions of audience experiences” (2004).

This continues to build a case for the performative reception of the hand-painted works. The previous focus on literary representation has failed to provide meaningful solutions for the abstract hand-painted works. However, recognising the relevance of liveness to the reception of the hand-painted works validates the artworks as process, changing the point of focus – in terms of meaning- to the audience’s ephemeral and corporeal experience within the live moment of the performance, instead of within the film as art object.

### **The performative qualities of the hand-painted works: the case for 'invisible' participation**

Through the emphasis on the artistic process, the resignation of authorship, the participative role of the audience and the liveness of reception, Fluxus and Happenings (and the wider performative decade of the 1960s) offers a new way to approach the hand-painted works and also demands a revised approach to the analysis of the nature of their reception. The collection's previous location within film has prevented this contextual approach to reception through performance. Instead, by exploring the development of reception in performance in the 1960s and 1970s, I am offering a shifted way of recognising the works as examples of performance art. Consequently, I want to develop a fresh approach to understanding their reception and the way in which direct and empirical meaning of the works can be understood. It is necessary at first to briefly recap my approach. I am not exploring the hand-painted works as an example of either fluxus or happenings. Dick Higgin's satirical fluxfilms clarified some of the essential differences between this performative area of art in the 1960s and the more traditional avant-garde developments of the medium of film, of which Brakhage has previously been aligned with. I am instead arguing for a new perspective for the reception of the hand-painted works that relocates the collection as part of 1960s performance art rather than avant-garde film, which has previously been proffered. I will demonstrate that this performative and participative context is a more appropriate critical frame for considering the hand-painted works because of the importance of audience experience and, thus, the potential to understand how personal experience is made meaningful.

To summarise the current reception status, the hand-painted works appear irrelevant. There has been no method of literary analysis that has been able to demonstrate the meaning of the works, no objective understanding that has been achieved and no wider relevance of the artist's limited discussions that has solicited meaning more widely. Historical analysis (or the absence of such) has proven there is no one objective way of receiving the works, or even an objective approach that demonstrates this collection is meaningful and relevant to the wider art culture. The relevance of abstraction within the hand-painted images provides very little common-ground for objective analysis, purposefully removing any opportunity for objective representation or literary narrative, within the artwork itself. Therefore, like the many examples of fluxus and happenings that I have explored, the hand-painted collection cannot champion the concept of artwork as object- it cannot offer a method of analysis, and thus meaning, at any given moment in time through the makeup of the art alone. Similar to the



fluxkits, the films alone cannot contain meaning or rather they are the site of a polyphonic cacophony of potential meanings. The object of the film itself cannot be the subject of the art in the same way as the pom-pom; any hand-painted film is not *about* the hand-painted images; rather, I am suggesting, it is about *how* the audience member experiences these images in a localised and subjective but personally meaningful way. They require audience engagement to activate the pregnant visual narrative, which can be achieved by recognising the shifted distinction of the collection as examples of performance. This, subsequently, draws attention to the moment of reception as a live event, mirroring the performative process promoted in the 1960s. A direct experience of the artwork by an audience member enables the art process to become active and participative- both necessary elements of the process are present within the same space and time- enabling audience participation to occur. The result of this is for the visual narrative description alone to be experienced in a personal and unique way, through the activity and engagement of the individual. Before this live moment of reception, the experience of the audience is the unknown element of the process: it cannot be accounted for until the live interaction has started, the meanings that can be associated with the visual narrative cannot be predicted. This is regardless of the method in which the audience views the hand-painted works, which could be (similarly to performance) at a public screening with other audience members, or it could be alone at a computer. The makeup of the reception event cannot change the performative quality of the reception experience, as long as each individual is experiencing a hand-painted work. Therefore, in the same way as performance, the hand-painted works must be considered as rich sites of potential meaning- they require contact with audience members to enable this fundamental process to take place and provide meaningful experiences of the visual narrative. Similar to performance, this process is never complete- it is always in flux, always returning to a dormant state after the previous live reception, waiting for a further continuation of the process through access to a future audience. Consequently, reception must be an imperative part of the creative process, and the role of audience members as part of this process is necessary for reception to occur. However, if the presence of audience members in the space has the potential to actually change the outcome of the artwork, by providing meaningful experience, their role- through reception- must be active. The result of their participation provides meaning to the abstract object, where before there was none, because it actively connects the object to meaningful, everyday experience. As John Dewey explains,

Even a crude experience, if authentically an experience, is more fit to give a clue to the intrinsic nature of esthetic experience than is an object already set apart from any other mode of experience. Following this clue we can discover how the work of art develops and accentuates what is characteristically valuable in things of everyday enjoyment (2005, p. 9).

When an audience member participates in the work, and takes part in their own experience of the hand-painted film, they are providing a layer of knowledge and experience that was not available before the live moment of the viewing as it relates to their own, private, everyday experience of living. This layer of experience is only relevant because of the individual viewing the work, and will only be relevant to the film as art object in the live moment of reception- it is not available once the viewing has ended and the individual is no longer viewing the artwork. This is because the completed hand-painted work as object is, in itself, alienated from experience. It requires contact with individuals to connect it to this layer of highly personal experience and understanding, and thus complete that instance of the art process.

By arguing for the reception experience of a hand-painted film as a live performative event, and by emphasising the significance of the audience role within this event, I am therefore acknowledging the existence of a participative role for the audience. Participation must take place for engaged audience members as, without their participation, the creative process will not change. When each audience member accepts the invitation to participate, and actively experiences the work, they offer a unique example of the completed creative process- contributing to the visual narrative of the films by experiencing their own subjective interpretation of the work. To confirm David E R George's earlier point, this meaningful experience does not equal an 'understanding' of the works as, by accepting the significance of the process over the art object, the potential for the artwork to objectively offer an understanding or clear message has been removed. Instead, by meaningful experience, it is meant that each audience member will have chosen to engage with the artworks during the live experience of reception and experienced that live reception in a highly personal and subjective way. This experience must vary in each and every instance the works come into contact with an audience, as the meaning lies with the personalities, memories and life experiences of those individuals who view it. As Henry Daniel writes,

[A]s witnesses/ participants, we are obliged to make sense of our actions by 'composing' meanings in accordance with our own world picture. [...] much more complex levels of information with which we can interact are not always reducible to logical and meaningful narratives [...] they are in themselves, performic relations between aspects of embodied knowledge (Daniel in Mock [Ed.], 2000, p. 63).

Furthermore, that layer of knowledge and experience is fundamental to the creative experience- it did not exist prior to the moment of reception and without it, it is impossible to demonstrate that the hand-painted works offer meaning and, therefore, demonstrate their worth as art. Through each example of audience participation, the hand-painted works are developed into a meaningful art experience.

By arguing for the participative role of audience members experiencing the hand-painted works, this thesis is challenging a fiercely debated area across the arts- the existence of non-physical audience participation within an art experience with no (established) performers. By non-physical, I refer to a lack of regular physical movement as an invited part of the reception event (all examples of non-physical participation will still likely involve the experience of physical sensations of the body during the live reception event, see Chapter Six). Across examples of happenings and fluxus I evidenced the existence of mental participation as part of the role of audience members. I demonstrated the requirement of mental participation in order for the performative process to be complete, including the examples of fluxkits and Yoko Ono's event card. This demonstrated the potential for non-physical participation in art to take place because of the depth of audience experience and activity required, and produced, in order for meaningful experience to occur. However, this argument has not previously been associated with the hand-painted works because of its previous location within the medium of film. Where film conventionally expects the relative stillness of its audience members as part of its reception, and isn't likely to offer opportunities for physical participation, the relationship between audience participation in performance and the active experience of audience members viewing a film has not previously been considered in this light. However, my arguments for the concept of invisible participation allow audiences of the hand-painted works to be co-creators of the work through their unique and subjective experience. This experience enables meaningful interpretations of the works to be understood on a localised level, different for each audience member as a result of their unique lived experience. As David E R George reminds us,

Performance is spectator-orientated behaviour: it is the Spectator who sits in the limen, steps into the threshold to perform their strange exercise in 'othering'. The concentration which this requires has deceived some observers into accusing them of passivity. Those physically inert bodies are, however, only the necessary precondition of a cognitive and emotional intensity, an exercise in virtual experience (1999, p. 28).

Now that the collection has been relocated within performance, with its performative and participative connections explored, a new methodology of the reception for the hand-

painted films can demonstrate the existence of active mental participation as a key requirement of the artistic process.

However, even within the medium of performance, there are currently limited existing methodologies to prove the existence of non-physical audience participation. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, audience reception within performance has grown considerably in a practical sense, but is still greatly let down by its lack of theoretical analysis. As a result, it has previously been difficult to prove invisible audience participation does occur and that it is crucially impacting the artwork. This is necessary in order to distinguish audience members as active and participative in contrast to generic passive audience engagement understood across many of the more literary-focused arts. This mental experience of participation across the arts has received little examination in great detail- in fact, there has been little focus on clearly defining this 'invisible' participation from more passive methods of reception. And yet they are wholly different. To return to Dewey, "Perception is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive, not a withholding of energy." (2005, p. 55). Active participation can be demonstrated through the level of engagement and activity taking place in the viewer- whilst invisible outwardly, the experience of each audience member is evidence of the participation that has taken place in the reception experience. The next logical step in evidencing this is to develop a practice that demonstrates this methodology, providing new primary experience of subjective audience experience (see Chapter Six.)

Understandably, the balance between such invisible audience participation and passive audience engagement is an area of strong contention. Numerous practitioners have been clear in rejecting a widespread understanding of participation in such passive examples of audience reception in the arts. For example, Jeff Kelley writes:

Of course, we can say that any artwork, no matter how conventional, is 'experienced' by its audience, and that such experience, which involves interpretation, constitutes a form of participation. But that's stretching common sense. Acts of passive regard, no matter how critical or sophisticated, are not participatory. They are merely good manners (esthetic behaviour?) (1996, p.xviii).

Kelley's conclusions are sensible- the significance of participation must be active (although not necessary physical) and must impact the reception experience and, therefore, the art process in order to demonstrate its distance from passive reception. *Active* participation requires physical and/ or mental engagement of some kind in direct response to the invitation of participation offered. This invitation may be accepted, leading to audience

members actively engaging in receiving the work, and completing this instance of the creative process. Or, in contrast, it might be rejected, through either audience members being uninterested (no or little attempt at mental engagement) or leaving the live reception event. Either way, the existence of the invitation offers evidence towards the role of participation that enables this meaningful interaction with the artwork to take place. To confirm, not every audience member who views the hand-painted works is necessarily awarded a participative status that leads to meaningful engagement- if an audience member is not interested in the work, and doesn't actively engage in their experience of the artwork during the live reception, they have not completed or changed the artistic process of the artwork and have, therefore, not engaged in a subjective meaningful experience of the work. However, this still evidences the opportunity to participate, demonstrating audience members' active agency and participation by choosing to leave the work incomplete through their inaction.

### **Moving towards a method of performative reception experience for the hand-painted works**

So far, I have argued for the availability of a participative role for audience members of the hand-painted works. Drawing on significant examples from the performative decade of the 1960s, I have shown the relevance of art process, audience participation and live reception as performative reception qualities of the overall new interdisciplinary location of the hand-painted films. I have also made a case for the existence of invisible participation as a mental, phenomenological act that bridges the objective visual narrative of the works to the subjective meaningful experience felt by audience members. However, in order to successfully relocate the hand-painted works into a performative location, a new practice-based method of inquiry must be developed to start to assess this performative mode of reception. It must demonstrate the impact of direct and empirical audience experience and the effect this meaning has in regards to the visual narrative I identified in Chapter Four. In achieving this, the participative quality of this method of audience reception will be evidenced, demonstrating the significance of this performative location for the works. Invisible participation has only remained invisible because of the current landscape of scholarship concerning reception, which has largely ignored or avoided asking audience members to share their own reception experiences. This highlights an ongoing struggle across performance reception theory to "stop privileging expert voices and rendering other audiences mute or invisible [and instead] map the complexity of audiences' reactions from

diverse subject positions” (in Sant, 2017, p. 122). By providing an opportunity for audience members to voice their experiences of a hand-painted work, this study would promote the role of invisible participation for audiences. This would help broaden the current understanding of participation in the arts whilst protecting its meaning and value across all media.

However, this approach, whilst necessary, is problematic in terms of the depth of personal audience experience it needs to engage with. To achieve this will mean demystifying the concept of ‘meaningful experience’, which is currently, in itself, an abstract and complex term, and explore in much greater detail what experience is felt by the audience through reception. As I will explore in Chapter Six, both academic and practical research has already started taking place to develop this line of empirical, embodied and corporeal reception experience that puts the audience member at the heart of their own expressed perceptions of performance. Continuing this line of enquiry, and developing such a methodology for Brakhage’s hand-painted works, will provide useful insights that can have wide reaching implications for the role of reception across the arts. But as Joanna Bucknall asks, “[H]ow might one document the perception of new primary experiences produced [...] when those encounters are fundamentally located *in* the experiencing body of the audience? (2017, p. 6). To resolve this means changing the current infrastructure of audience reception by extensively shifting focus towards audience experience through direct contact *with* audience members- engaging in material audience research rather than speculative research. By developing reception practice to engage with audience members directly, reception will embed primary audience feedback into its practice; empowering audience members, through theory, in the same way that performance has achieved on a practical level- by seeking participation from audience members themselves. This will inevitably require a culture shift for audiences themselves, who currently do not expect to be involved in the study of art reception. Similarly, audience members are not likely to instinctively know how to engage with such personal perspectives as part of a personal and meaningful exploration of their own experience of artwork. As I touched upon in Chapter Two, audience reception needs to be recognised as a creative stage in as much detail as the artist’s stage of production. This is more complex due to the historical negligence of the audience role, meaning, “it is not so easy in the case of the perceiver and appreciator to understand the intimate union of doing and undergoing as it is in the case of the maker” (2005, p. 54). In contrast to literary approaches in art, when communication is passed onto audiences, this new approach to reception will rely on audience’s awareness of their own experience and

their ability to communicate such experience. Therefore, a shifted focus is needed that forefronts a new perception of art reception. It must empower individuals to locate personalised art experience through personal perception and through the body. By providing and evidencing this new methodology for the reception of the hand-painted works, this thesis will also contribute to the validity of reception as a site of knowledge within the academy. This is crucial in order to expand on this area of research, and validate empirical methods of exploring audience experience.

This, in turn, requires returning to the philosophy of phenomenology; exploring the study of how individual living experience can be considered a meaningful and valid site of knowledge and insight. This study is in itself highly personal and subjective- the arousal of different thoughts, emotions and interests is unique to the individual. These are felt and *lived through* the embodiment of mental and physical sensory stimulations that are embedded within the body (as (syn)aesthetic). However, exploring these stimulations in regards to, and to enhance, our personal experience of art is generally unheard of within art reception approaches. And yet, they are crucial in turning perception from the art object inwards, to a personal and independent study of the self as the focus of perception. As Merleau-Ponty wrote,

In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover ourselves, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception (2002, p. 239).

This subjective approach to empirical audience reception provides reflexive opportunities for individuals that can change and develop lived experience more widely. For by turning attention inward, art reception can be regarded as a reflexive practice, “a *practical activity*, that changes our understandings, our ways of seeing, hearing and behaving, our ways of narrating aspects of our lives and so on” (Feige, 2010, p. 139). In this way, through the process of the performance and through the new reception infrastructure I am proposing for participants, art reception can offer something of clear personal and meaningful value to their wider lived experience and the everyday life that performance has attempted to explore. It also offers new primary material where understanding and knowledge about the nature of the experienced event can be sought and validated. Not only does this further illustrate the presence of participation, but also draws attention back to the wider, meaningful consequences of Art- including the ontology of the events and the experience of them.

To return to Brakhage's hand-painted works, the significance of such a model of reception is profound. If empirical audience engagement focused on the reception of the works can be achieved, audience conversations could shed light on the personalised 'meaningful experiences' of the otherwise abstract artworks. It is because of their abstract qualities that this methodology towards audience reception makes sense to the hand-painted collection, and offers valuable approaches to the key existing issues of the hand-painted films (see Chapter One). It therefore validates abstract art and the opportunities it provides for reflexive experience and understanding, that can, in turn, impact everyday lived experience. For literary focused artworks, such a theory of reception might mean re-learning ways audiences engage with art. But for the hand-painted works, this methodology offers a much-needed opportunity to develop the abstract visual narrative, in order to understand how such works can provide meaningful and, potentially, reflexive experiences that are significant to the concrete, daily living experiences of individuals.

Throughout this chapter, I have confirmed the epistemological shift of the hand-painted collection to a new interdisciplinary location within performance rather than avant-garde film. This location enables performative qualities of liveness and participation to greatly develop the role of audiences in soliciting meaning in the abstract films, whilst remaining true to the relevance of film, painting and music that lie at the heart of the collection's visual narrative. This unique interdisciplinary case study, specifically for Brakhage's second stage works, concludes my liberation of their previous filmic location and demonstrates the wider opportunities available for discussion now that such limiting expectations have been removed. Instead, my initial development of a new audience-focused reception theory- drawing on the performative role of participation- offers new opportunities to the reception of the hand-painted works that could transform their current relevance within the art world. Due to their abstract quality, they highlight the significance of personal reception that can provide meaning where previous theoretical approaches could not. However, as I have already offered, this in itself is not enough. The next step to validating this new theory of reception, and confirming the performative location of the hand-painted works, is to offer empirical data that evidences this reception theory. As a result, Chapter Six will develop a practical investigation to develop and assess this performative reception methodology, providing new and much-needed primary material from the audience as co-creators of the works.



## Chapter Six: Re-approaching Stan Brakhage: A new qualitative and empirical method of reception

### Part One: Designing an empirical method of reception for the hand-painted works

This study has, for the first time, drawn attention to the significance of reception specifically for the collection of Brakhage's hand-painted works (see Chapters Four and Five). It has moved away from a historic, contextual understanding of the works through avant-garde film, heavily influenced by the author's own auteur perspectives. Instead, this study has argued for an interdisciplinary framing of reception, drawing attention to the role of the audience through relevant performance research that has been applied to the hand-painted collection (see Chapter Five). I have offered important new approaches to audience reception that cater for the abstract and subjective qualities of the visual narrative within Brakhage's works. These approaches have highlighted the important role played by live audiences as active co-creators of meaning within the reception of the hand-painted films.

But, as I have noted, this theoretical approach to audience reception is not enough. It does not fully demonstrate the role of audience members as co-creators and, crucially, does not come into contact with actual audience members of the hand-painted works. As such, it currently fails to *evidence* the individual and subjective meaningful experiences of audience members of the hand-painted works that I argued for in Chapter Five. This primary evidence is greatly needed for reception theory to sincerely demonstrate an interest in the actual voices of everyday audience members in order to emancipate reception theory from "the control of 'hierarchical interpretative gatekeeping'" (Lynne Conner in Sant, 2017, p. 119). Across this study, I have argued that such 'hierarchical gatekeeping' (existing approaches to film theory and criticism, in this study) has failed to fully consider the fundamental abstract and subjective nature of the films in a meaningful way, which has played a critical role in the absence of interest in Brakhage's second stage collection. A performative reception approach offers a crucial solution to this problem, but only if there is a genuine interest in engaging with actual audience members and their subjective experiences. It is only by empowering audience voices that new, subjective approaches to reception experiences of the hand-painted works can be achieved, filling the current gap of meaningful literature on this topic. The next methodological step in this study therefore turns towards the field of direct and empirical audience research in order to design a unique, practice-based method of reception enquiry for the hand-painted works. This chapter will focus on the design and

implementation of such a method that best supports audience members in exploring and communicating their reception experience of the abstract, avant-garde visuals.

### **An overview of existing empirical audience research**

As previously mentioned, a key challenge for qualitative reception studies is to demystify the concept of meaningful audience experience. This is achieved by evidencing the subjective responses individual audience members have to performance (including physical, mental and emotional sensations) that result in meaningful experiences of the work. However, understanding how this process is experienced by individual audience members is a difficult and complex task. In *Ten Years of Viewing from Within* (a reflection on the 'legacy' of the original and seminal *Viewing from Within*), Claire Petitmengin highlights these complexities, "Who amongst us would be able to describe spontaneously and precisely the lived experience associated with his recollection, decision, reading or emotional processes?" (Petitmengin [Ed.], 2009, p. 8). Petitmengin's question is at the heart of qualitative reception studies and will be a cornerstone of this chapter. Her question also stands in direct contrast to historical quantitative approaches to reception that instead centred on the statistical makeup of audiences but, crucially, resulted in researchers knowing "nothing about their experience in the theatre" (Sauter, 2010, p. 242). As demonstrated in Chapter Five, scholars, including Willmar Sauter, Matthew Reason and Martin Barker, have been instrumental in moving away from such quantitative approaches to reception by investigating the ways in which primary audience experience can be captured. In doing so, they have begun crucial academic work that evidences and legitimises the reflective and contemplative process of audiences in relation to their lived experience of performance. By directly involving audience members, their empirical studies have provided methodological frameworks to "uncover, analyse and present, richly detailed descriptions of how audiences experience live performances" (Reason, 2010, p. 15).

However, to return to Petitmengin's question, these empirical methodologies are reliant on an audience's ability to spontaneously explore their lived experience. They require audience members to have awareness and understanding of their own unique perceptions of a live performance and, secondly, an ability to describe said experience. This involves greater understanding of the mental framework of consciousness as "an *interior* phenomenon, something we experience *as* subjectivity" (Varela & Shear, 2000, p. 189). This might contradict the subconscious expectation of experience to be something inherently understood. As Jonathan Shear and Ron Jevning illustrate:

...we generally take it for granted that experiences are *given* to us, and that their content is generally *transparent*. We know that our experiences are precisely because they are our experiences; all we need to do is introspect and report. In reality, however, as phenomenological thinkers effectively point out, it is not so simple. For our experiences often have unnoticed nuances. And the training in phenomenological methods is designed, among other things, to enable us to become aware of just such otherwise unnoticed features of our experience (in Valera & Shear, 2000, p 200).

Exploring qualitative reception academia therefore returns this thesis to the epistemology of experience and perception: questioning how audience members feel, know and understand their own embodied experience of performance. Receiving such information from audience members enables their perceptions of their reception experience to be captured.

This is particularly important for demystifying lived experience in relation to the abstract hand-painted works. The highly subjective and localised approach to reflective experience draws attention to consciousness as part of the mental construct of subjectivity. Therefore, understanding the embodied mental and corporeal processes that occur when experiencing live performance (the thoughts, emotions, physical sensations that are received through the body) are integral to understanding why witnessing such a performance can be meaningful. The hand-painted collection offers a promising case study for an empirical reception study because of the works' abstract nature. In contrast to literary narrative artworks, the lack of representational content in the hand-painted works frustrates any search for an objective 'reading' of the films as texts, as the lack of existing literature has shown. This helps in promoting the epistemology of empirical, subjective audience experience, as the films are not subservient to pre-existing, objective theories. This returns to the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity: "the main reason for our lack of awareness seems to be our usual absorption in the content, the object, the 'what' of our activity, to the detriment of the 'how'" (Petitmengin, 2009, p. 8). The hand-painted films offer no objective content, no literary 'what' for audience members to become absorbed in. Instead, the visual narrative provides a variety of abstract visual sensations for audience members to experience and interpret subjectively. This requires audience members to have an awareness of their own consciousness and presence during the live moment of performance in order to reflect on their highly personal and embodied experience as active witnesses and co-creators of the event.

There are clear limitations to the methods by which academics can learn of this mental process of consciousness and subjectivity, which is both somatic and corporeal, taking place privately in the embodied experience of the body and mind of each individual. However,

through encouraging individual descriptions and comments, empirical reception research can provide evidence of an individual's understanding and exploration of their own personal lived experience. This, in itself, demonstrates a further role of participation, as "audience members are actively engaged in the process of reflecting upon and making sense of their experiences for themselves" (Reason, 2010, p31). Empirical reception research naturally relies on the quality and accuracy of this personal process of reflection on behalf of the audience or, put another way, the "conscious, reflective ability to externalise that experience" (Reason, 2010, p. 15). This can be seen to develop what Joanna Bucknall coins the 'reflective participant' (Bucknall in Sant, 2017, p. 127), an audience member involved in the 'embodied research activities' that is a co-creator of meaning through their active and participative role in the performance. This is greatly needed as "unless [audience members'] recollections are shared more widely this embodied knowledge becomes lost to cultural memory" (Sant, 2017, p. 117). As empirical reception research develops, the increased gathering of this embodied knowledge as qualitative data will enable greater understanding of not just the structures of consciousness as lived experience, but also of the ways in which performance, and art more widely, are meaningful to audience members. This is, once again, of great interest to my creation of a qualitative, empirical reception method for audiences of the hand-painted works. The shared experiences of 'reflective participants' can provide currently absent insights into how the abstract painted images of the works can be meaningful and relevant to lived experience. If achievable, this could support a new epistemological and original approach to the hand-painted works that both demonstrates the success of the interdisciplinary relocation of the works and evidences, for the first time, the subjective ways in which audiences meaningfully engage with the hand-painted works. This would promote my empirical, performative approach to reception, both adding to the existing understanding of reception through performance and significantly extending the current understanding and the opportunities for film.

### **Empirical reception data collection: The focus group**

In order to directly engage with audiences and their experiences of the hand-painted works, I have chosen to use the model of the focus-group as a method of data collection. In deciding upon a model for collecting empirical reception data, it was important to consider the existing work within the field of empirical reception academia and examine which approach best lends itself to creating a bespoke methodology for Brakhage's second stage works. The

crucial element to consider was the structure for data collection- how audiences will offer their perceptions on their subjective, reflective experience.

In researching the best research method, I explored a number of existing structures for data collection within the field of qualitative reception. Most rely on verbal interactions with participants (including interviews, case studies and focus-groups), although a unique area of reception research has recently explored creative opportunities outside verbal communication, which often result in the creation of new, primary artworks (a good example is available in Reason, 2012). However, the focus group is the most appropriate method of data collection for this study, designing the most appropriate environment and structure for audiences to discuss their experiences of a hand-painted works. This is for reasons not exclusively to do with the actual content of the hand-painted film (i.e. the visual narrative) but due to the sociable conditions of the environment it creates. The focus group is today considered a traditional and widespread method of data collection as a “distinctive member of the qualitative research family” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015, p. 1). With published examples from as early as 1926 (Emory S. Bogardus) across the social sciences, the focus group was born out of the concept of group interviews (Morgan, D.L., 1997, p. 4) and has evolved across the twentieth century as a key empirical method of data collection. The most distinctive quality of the focus group, which sets it apart from other research methods, “is that data collection occurs in, and is facilitated by, a group setting” (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015, p. 17). Not only does this enable multiple data perspectives to be gathered at one time (and often one place) but it also impacts the data that is received as a result of the group setting. Multiple perspectives are shared communally, which means that the data received is affected by group dynamic and behaviours. Within empirical reception studies, the focus group has already become a staple methodology for exploring audience members’ experiences because of the flexible and sociable environment created that aids the collection of audience data. Performances, and other art experiences, are often considered social practices and experiences of entertainment, so the focus group’s communal setting fits neatly within the artistic practice itself. This group setting is also a key reason why I have adopted the focus group practice within my empirical reception methodology. The benefits and impact of the group dynamic can be explored in this investigation through the roles of communication, reflection and of community.

## *Communication*

Unsurprisingly, communication is the most significant theme for a qualitative reception methodology for the hand-painted works. It dictates the way in which participants will offer “self-reported data” (Morgan, 1997, p. 8), in this case describing their reflective and concrete experiences of the abstract works. The focus group method develops verbal responses from audiences through conversations had with other participants, relying on language as the key tool of communication. This uses the most natural and “primary mode of communicating and reflecting on experiences” (Wood, 2010, p. 29) as, “in Western cultures, there is a strong oral tradition, which makes the focus group with its verbal interactions and debate a natural way of gathering information (Stewart & Shamdassani, 2015, p. 35). This is beneficial for this study of the hand-painted works due to the abstraction of the art. The nature of the experience is already complex due to the absence of literary representation and, as a result, it is important to use a conventional and flexible mode of communication. As Karen Wood writes, “words are the most flexible system for articulation. Reflecting through language creates an indelible impression on our memories” (2010, p. 29). Whilst verbal language might not always cover the richness of an experience, as Wood goes on to argue, adopting a flexible and regular method of communication offers greater accessibility and autonomy with regard to what participants discuss and focus on within the wider makeup of their embodied reception experience. For the hand-painted works, using this conventional method of communication could be crucial to helping participants connect to their experience of the works, despite the abstract and unusual visual experience experienced.

The strength of flexible communication within the focus-group is highlighted when compared to another popular qualitative reception method: the interview. Unlike the focus-group, an interview relies on the sole presence of a participant without the social interaction and conversation with others. Whilst conversation offers flexibility of subject matter, and welcomes diverse tangents of discussion, the interview creates a restricted interaction between the questions posed by the interviewer and the related answers from the interviewee. Sauter acknowledges a key weakness of this relationship from his own experience of holding qualitative reception investigations. Pre-meditated questions will not necessarily explore the meaningful experience of an individual, as: “In interviews and questionnaires, the respondent answers the questions, irrespective of whether these are or are not relevant for that person” (2010, p. 245). In comparison, the flexible and open channels of conversation in the focus group give participants greater power and control over

the content of the discussion, ensuring the data received reflects the most relevant elements of their experience at that moment of reflection. This is highly significant, demonstrating a holistic approach to the generation of knowledge, as it is through the act of verbalising thought through language that knowledge is made concrete (in that instance) and is shared. To quote Foucault, “language is an *analysis* of thought: not a simple patterning, but a profound establishment of order in space” (1970, p. 83) and is also “the original form of all reflection” (1970, p. 84). Thus, it is through the empirical method of communicating individual audience thoughts and experiences that the abstract hand-painted images acquire concrete meaning. Shared perceptions and experiences of audience members, through language, enable the films to once again be connected to concrete experience and representation. Similar to Brakhage’s authorial personal experience of creating the works, an audience member’s reception experience of the works connects the painted images back to the material world and, therefore, back to representation. The images can be experienced only through an individual’s understanding of lived experience framed through their existence within (and as part of) the material world. However, in order for this concrete knowledge to be shared, participants require flexibility and freedom over the direction of conversation, to steer conversation towards that which is significant to them and to their experience and knowledge of living in the world. The focus group enables such flexibility and also supports continuous new directions of conversations, as different participants offer unique insights and new directions of conversation.

Many academics, including Wood, Reason and Morrison, discuss the benefits of the social method of the focus group as a method that provides such support from within the group of participants themselves. Morrison explains, “In focus group interviews, the group rather than the individual is interviewed. The group potentially provides a safe atmosphere, a context in which the synergy can generate more than the sum of the individual inputs” (1998, p. 168). Morrison continues by exploring the positive impact that focus groups can have on group dynamics. They can encourage less confident people to share their thoughts as they take “comfort and courage from the supportive presence of others so that information is delivered that otherwise would not have been volunteered” (1998, p. 169). Consequently, a focus group model provides a supportive environment for participants of a hand-painted reception study to reflect on, articulate and share what is likely to be an unfamiliar and/or difficult request of sharing personal knowledge of experience and production of an unfamiliar and abstract art experience. It is unlikely that many modern audiences will have previously come into contact with one of Brakhage’s hand-painted works (due to the historic

absence of interest in them). The abstract and non-representational images makes the task of considering the experience and perception potentially more daunting because of the lack of objective reading. Highly personal reactions, emotions and thoughts of the images might likely be considered. The social element of the focus-group provides a support mechanism for communicating such personal ideas. It provides safety and encouragement as participants chose how much to interact and offer, unlike an individual case study or interview. A space for confidence and reassurance to develop is offered as multiple perspectives being shared provides insight into others, this might reduce worry of saying something 'silly' or sharing information on a different level to others. The likely outcome of conversation taking place also reduces limelight on one individual for a long period of time whilst reflecting an everyday, conventional act that might also aid feelings of relaxation and ease. The result of greater comfort in the focus group setting increases the opportunity for individuals to engage with the focus of the conversation and offer personal, thoughtful insights. This improves the quality of the data gathered and provides greater depth and detail regarding the embodied reception experiences.

Creating the social setting of a focus group, that empowers the group of participants, consequently draws attention to the role of the researcher or facilitator. The way in which their role is presented and applied to the participants of the focus group impacts the ability of participants to direct conversation in ways meaningful or relevant to them. It is this ability to direct conversation that makes the focus group distinct from the private interview. In the latter, the interviewer has greater control over the direction of this discussion but this limits the genuine subjective, meaningful thoughts of the participant. By controlling the focus of conversation, the interviewer limits the empowerment of the participant and decreases the quality of subjective, empirical reception data. Existing empirical reception studies have drawn attention to the significance of the researcher's role within a focus group. Sauter's *Theatre Talks* offers a strong example. In his design, "[T]he idea was that the leaders should stimulate a conversation between the participants without engaging themselves in it more than absolutely necessary" (2000, p. 176). Similarly, Reason emphasised the significance of neutrality in his empirical study on *5 Soldiers*. He "had no relationship to the work itself, giving me an independence and distance that is essential in conducting audience research as it allows the researcher to approach spectators in as neutral a position as possible" (2017, p. 79). Thus, existing empirical reception studies have broadened the divide between the focus group and the interview through the role of the researcher or facilitator. In order to keep this division, it is important that this person limits their interaction and participation in the



group as much as possible, in order to enable a greater level of freedom and flexibility for participants. In this way, the empirical investigation can achieve a higher quality of data that reflects more accurately the most relevant and meaningful areas of the performance for the participants.

### *The role of reflection*

Returning to the prominent quote from Petitmengin at the beginning of this chapter, the role of reflection is integral for audience members to engage with the epistemology of their reception experience: how audience members know and understand their personal experiences of a hand-painted work. The quality and depth of reflection partaken by participants is a personal choice and is heavily linked to their level of activity and participation in the performance itself, as the original (direct) experience that is the object of their reflection. The level of engagement during the focus of reflection (the performance) impacts the quality and quantity of reflection available as a direct consequence of the level of participation partaken. Post-performance participation in the way of hypermnesia is also required. Hypermnesia is “the process of affective recall in which aspects of an original primary experience can be summoned, re-activated and re-enacted” (Bucknall, 2017, p. 2). It is only possible to receive insight into this private and personal mental process through hypermnesia, which enables memory recall to consider the experience and impact of the direct experience (of the performance) for each individual. Knowledge gained through the process of “reflective hypermnesia” (Bucknall, 2017, p. 2) is then communicated through language, as a verbal output of this reflective thought process. Because of the invisibility of the mental process of hypermnesia, it is easy to overlook this stage within the makeup of the methodology, however it is vital to the quality of the data collected. The current absence of awareness of hypermnesia in academia (and the lack of acknowledgement of this as an active example of mental participation) - particularly for audience members- is integrally linked to the lack of understanding around the relevance of the reception experience. Hypermnesia must be identified as a core stage within the wider makeup of the reception experience, as it demonstrates the participative role of audience members as co-creators of meaning. The practice of hypermnesia highlights the direct activity of audiences to explore and understand their meaningful experiences of the performance.

The communal structure of the focus group is vital in enabling the reflective process of hypermnesia to occur within my empirical study of the hand-painted works. Unlike an individual-based mode of data collection (such as an interview or case study) the group

dynamic enables hypermnesis thought to take place simultaneously, and as a result of, the collective ensemble of participants in one place. The communal element of the activity itself enables participants to listen to each other's thoughts and perspectives as a method of promoting hypermnesis, the participants themselves offer inspiration and potential stimulus through their own reflective comments, which encourage new and different areas of memory and experience to be recalled. This can, in itself, aid and encourage deeper reflective experiencing to take place. Karen Wood, who has herself designed a range of focus-group projects, clarifies the significance of this when she writes:

...reflection post-experience can provide a platform for engaging in aspects not yet realized through direct affect and can implant traces of the experience in one's memory. Equally, post-experience conversation acts as part of the experience and assists the audience members in articulating thought and sensation (2015, p. 37).

The social element of the group continues to develop the significance of this methodology, as participants can witness each other verbalise the *process* of reflective experiencing and remembering. The relaxed and supportive induction into reflective experience that is provided to participants *by each other* as this process is explored together is of crucial value to the quality of data offered. The comments offered encourage reflective reception discussion from members of the group itself, which, in turn, can support others to explore their own perceptions in a critical manner. This results in the activity of the focus group itself being understood as a reflexive tool for audience experience. It draws attention to the duration of the focus group as evidence of the activity and participation of audience members who, for that time, are involved in exploring their individual perceptions and experiences within the framework of the wider group.

The reflective experience of participants within the focus group is also related to the level and quality of reflective hypermnesis that participants undertake outside of a performance setting. Participants will have varied levels of knowledge and awareness of every-day lived experience, which will of course impact the quality of reflective experience in relation to a hand-painted work. Russel T. Hurlburt, Christopher L. Heavey and Arva Benasheb remind readers that, "What is extraordinary, and what needs to be taken seriously [...], is that some people may experience such sensory awareness at nearly all their waking moments, others may experience it almost none" (in Petitmengin, 2009, p. 233). This returns to the wider implication, and the overarching aim, of empirical reception research to increase awareness of lived experience across everyday life. Reflecting on subjective experiences of performance can demonstrate the ways in which performance are experienced meaningfully- through the sensations and thoughts that are felt in the experiencing body. The greater awareness

participants have of reflective experience, the greater, deeper and more accurate insights they can provide into how they experience performance meaningfully. This will be a key area of focus in my next section, community.

#### *The impact of community for reception research*

The makeup of the focus group invites a number of participants into the same space to discuss their reflective experience of a hand-painted film. This method brings together different and diverse characters - with differing levels of skill and experience in exploring their embodied experience of the performance and vocalising that experience. Whilst the individual comments are of great use to the investigation (in terms of the primary data they provide), the collective group of participants can be considered a key community themselves through the reflective reception experience that takes place as a result of the focus group. Not only this, but the makeup of participants within each unique focus group reflects the habits and patterns of broader communities- from their hobbies and interests to their cultures and belief systems and even financial backgrounds etc. All of this can impact the epistemology of participants' experiences or, put simply, their knowledge of their own reflective experience, and how such experience is communicated within the investigation. This does not necessarily need to be captured through the focus-group itself, as the result of belonging to these different communities impacts the experience, it is embedded within, and inseparable from, lived experience. Karen Wood explores this in detail in her article, *Audience as Community* [2015] when she suggests, "the idea of audiences as a community that is enriched with corporeal knowledge" (p. 29). This thesis therefore argues such knowledge is integral to the reflective experiences, and therefore the perceptions of, individual audience members, which the focus-group sessions aims to explore.

It is impossible to quantify the impact of distinct communities to subjective qualitative experience due to the embodied and overlapping nature of these values. However, qualitative research can direct investigations towards exploring the empirical impact of communities on lived experience. As Barker indicates, "[W]e cannot draw boundaries around such communities. We do not know how to measure degrees of commitment to a community. I believe, however, that we now potentially have the methodological capacity to make this concept empirically measurable and testable" (2006). This is a significant development for qualitative studies as it draws attention to the ways in which community might be understood to impact our mental frameworks of experience. Matthew Reason has already added to this field of qualitative reception academia through his 'Representing

Soldiers to Soldiers' project. This study targeted the reflective experiences of army and ex-army communities when viewing the dance performance, *5 Soliders* (Rosie Kay Dance Company, 2008). The focus group element of the investigation explored participants' perceptions around the authenticity of the piece in relation to their direct military experience. The concept of authenticity encouraged participants to reflect on both their lived experience and their reception experience of the performance. Their experience of the performance was isolated for the study because of their real-life experience of a military community. Their lived experience of military action also demonstrated an impact on the way in which the performance was received- highlighting the significance of reflective thought to the reception of the piece.

For my investigation of the hand-painted works, the concept of community can be used to answer a crucial gap in current qualitative research knowledge. As noted, there is a severe lack of knowledge around audience's own understanding of the epistemology of reflective experience. The lack of knowledge around how lived experience is felt and described by an individual currently reduces the articulation of the reflective experience, and possibly the reflective experience itself. This therefore can negatively impact the quality of the empirical data received in reception research. This once again returns to Petitmengin's core question: "Who amongst us would be able to describe spontaneously and precisely the lived experience associated with his recollection decision, reading or emotional processes?" (Petitmengin [Ed.], 2009, p. 8). Without an answer to Petitmengin's critical question, there will continue to be a crucial obstacle to the development of qualitative reception studies: the complication of audience members accessing their reflective lived experience of performance. Therefore, a crucial question for this study is this: does a community exist that focuses on practically examining the mental constructs of how lived experience is felt? I propose that such a community does exist, where individuals related to this sense of community have access to the mental tools required to explore their awareness and knowledge of their reflective experience of a hand-painted work. If I can demonstrate that such a community can offer valuable mental assets for this task (through a qualitative study focused on the experiences of a particular community) it would be possible to identify a valuable new approach to developing the qualities needed for audience members to best engage with qualitative and reflective reception studies.

I will now offer a qualitative reception study of the hand-painted works, engaging the community I propose can provide a solution to Petitmengin's questions. This focus-group will

examine a particular practice that has become increasingly relevant to the Western world in the twenty-first century because of its ability to impact subjective mental experience: the practice of mindfulness and meditation.

### **Mindfulness and Meditation: The significance for the hand-painted works**

Mindfulness and meditation is a broad and diverse spiritual concept<sup>22</sup> that includes vast and, sometimes, contradictory practices. Therefore, before examining the relevance of this field of study to the hand-painted works, it is first necessary to clarify how mindfulness and meditation will be treated and defined within this thesis. This task of defining mindfulness and meditation is so complex because of the deep and enriching worldwide history of this practice, steeped in different approaches to tradition, religion and practice. Stereotypically, the history of mindfulness and meditation has been categorised through a conventional understanding of the Eastern and Western divide. The notion of the Eastern approach attempts to amalgamate those “Eastern philosophies [that] share this belief in spiritual oneness” (Sainte Croix, 2002, p. 26), which lie at the heart of the origins of meditation. In reality, this embodies different religious approaches, including Jainism, Hinduism and, consequently, Buddhism, across a number of Asian countries, India, China and Nepal etc. (a brief but succinct analysis of the differing origins of meditation can be found by Keefe in Turner, 2017, p. 302, a more intensive exploration exists in Grewal, D. S., 2017). This has therefore resulted in a perhaps crude geographical, historical divide between ‘Eastern’/ Asian practices and those considered recent Western approaches to meditation, that span across Europe, North America and Australasia<sup>23</sup>.

This ‘recent’ growth of meditation is associated with the same key crucial decades for performance history, the 1960s and 1970s. The “cultural shifts” of these decades “raised interest in [...] the intersection of mind, body, and spirit to a new level [...] include[ing] topics such as occult and esoterica, meditation and mindfulness, alternative health and yoga” (Garrett, 2017, p. 24). Louis Komjathy identifies the changes to US immigration law in 1965 as a critical event that resulted in “an influx of Asian immigrant teachers, to increasing numbers of religious communities associated with them and their spiritual successors, and to greater access

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<sup>22</sup> In this chapter, any references to mindfulness and meditation relates to this field of study. Whilst this is an oversimplification of two complex practices, mindfulness and meditation are very closely connected. Considering the wider field of both practices enables this study to develop a more comprehensive and flexible methodology.

<sup>23</sup> Religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam also have long and complex histories with meditation, demonstrating the over-simplification of the Eastern and Western divide.

to Asian meditation methods, especially those associated with Buddhism and Hinduism” (2017, p. 23). The recent growth of meditation across North America and Europe is of particular interest to this study. This growth has been less focused on potential religious connections and has instead developed as a modern approach to mental health and wellbeing. For example, meditation has been suggested to combat “our restlessness to be a product of digital age conditioning (Fitzgerald, 2017, p. 52). This modern take on mindfulness and meditation, widely spanning from the non-theological possibilities of Buddhist meditation, has drawn attention to a popular holistic approach to everyday living. It has become a relatable approach for self-improvement and self-development across every-day life that encourages contentment and awareness of the present. Both terms can be traced across a range of activities and practices for both physical and mental health, including exercise classes like yoga and tai chi, and as self-help approaches for health issues including depression and anxiety.

As a result of this complex and convoluted history, defining mindfulness and meditation is problematic. Clear similarities and overarching tendencies can be highlighted, such as the significance of heightened awareness (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006, p. 231), “being yourself and knowing something about who that is” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. xvi), and attempting to “still the turbulence of our outer and inner lives” (Michael West in Fontana, 2012, Foreword). Even the relationship between mindfulness and meditation can be foggy, as both terms are often used interchangeably and, problematically, co-exist alongside the term ‘mindful meditation’. In this thesis the notions of mindfulness and meditation, and the relationship between them, will be understood as a state of being focused on awareness that *can* be considered or achieved through meditation. I will follow celebrated mindfulness academic Jon Kabat-Zinn’s understanding that:

Mindfulness has to do above all with attention and awareness, which are universal human qualities. But in our society, we tend to take these capacities for granted and don’t think to develop them systematically in the service of self-understanding and wisdom. Meditation is the process by which we go about deepening our attention and awareness, refining them, and putting them to a greater practical use in our lives (1994, p. vxii).

This refers to the key aim of mindfulness, to draw attention to the present moment, which is relevant and relatable to all moments of our life and lived experience. Crucially, this state of awareness must be neutral and non-judgemental of the thoughts, actions and mental processes that take place at that point in time, in order to directly engage with the liveness of that present moment. In other words, mindfulness is about observing experience as a form of corporeal knowledge- “stopping to make contact with the ever-shifting experience that we are having at the time, and to observe the nature of our relationship to that experience,

the nature of our presence at that moment” (Andre, 2014, p. 18). To return to Kabat-Zinn’s definition, meditation (or, more specifically, mindful meditation) can be used as a technique to develop a state of mindfulness. It often invokes expectations of seated meditation, which can help train an individual to develop a state of mindful awareness. However, meditation is a much broader concept outside of mindfulness alone: it tends to be practiced more succinctly at a specific period in the day, rather than the broad availability of mindfulness which can be experienced at all times. Meditation can also be considered reflexive in a way that mindfulness alone cannot, as mindfulness “does *not* call for engaging with thoughts about causes or consequences or with memories of similar experiences” (Archer, 2016, p. 72). Through meditation, the knowledge and insight gained from mindfulness can be explored further to develop “a shift in the relationships to thoughts, feelings, and experiences of self” (Sussman & Kossak, 2011, p. 60). In essence, it is reflexive and participative.

Mindfulness and meditation is of crucial value to my empirical reception method for the hand-painted works as a practical solution to Petitmengin’s question- how do we gain awareness of our lived experience at any given moment? Mindfulness and meditation provides an active practice to develop awareness of lived experience (and therefore embodied knowledge) which can be applied to the experience of reception. Mindfulness and meditation highlights each individual’s role in “tak[ing] care of the territory of direct experience in the present moment and the learning that comes out of it” (Middleton, 2017, p. 5), to promote the significance and relevance of lived experience as a source of personal and meaningful knowledge. It is a statement of “faith in direct experience itself” (Hagan, 2007, p. 10), which returns the focus of experience to the self as the subject and site of personal knowledge and meaning. Similar to Brakhage’s views on perception, this awareness is portrayed as an ongoing process, championing the positive impact of continual self-awareness as a mode of living. The *process* of mindfulness and meditation is critical in continuing to reflect attention to the self. This process is available through its Buddhist origins, as “[T]here are no ‘things’ in Buddhism, only processes” (George, 1999, p. 50), mindfulness and meditation guarantees a subjective and personal investigation into meaning, preventing any focus on objective and representative thought and instead drawing attention to the ways an individual engages and interacts with their surroundings (and the impact this has for the embodied self). Within an artistic setting, this prioritises the relevance of an audience’s lived experience during the moment of reception because it increases the evidence for the active and participative nature of this role. The continual mental process emphasised through mindfulness and meditation can be used to theoretically demonstrate the active and participative

experience of audience members. The stimulus of the performance will result in subjective, corporeal knowledge through lived experience of witnessing the live event. If awareness of lived experience during the live moment of reception is both promoted to, and realised by, audience members, the significance of their lived experience of performance reception can develop.

Secondly, mindfulness and meditation also offers a critical methodology of *how* to be aware of subjective lived experience during the live moment of reception, which is vital in enabling audience members to “describe spontaneously and precisely lived experience” (Petitmengin [Ed.], 2009, p. 8). The direct practice of mindfulness and meditation offers concrete guidance on how to become aware of the ways in which lived experience manifests and is felt by the self. Through a mindful and meditative perspective, this knowledge of lived experience is considered as already present and existing within the self. But what is needed is greater insight into how to pay attention and recall (hypermnesia) the nature of the experience. In *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Awakening*, Joseph Goldstein argues for something similar in relation to everyday lived experience. He writes,

When we pay careful attention, we see that everything is disappearing and new things are arising not only each day or hour but in every moment. When we leave our house, or simply walk from one room to another, can we notice this flow of changing experience- the flow of visual forms as we move, different sounds, changing sensations in the body, fleeting thoughts of images? What happens to each of these experiences? Do they last? The truth of their changing nature is so ordinary that we have mostly stopped noticing at all (2013, p. 31).

Goldstein’s quote therefore demonstrates the need to increase awareness of the ways in which the lived experience is felt through heightened awareness and attentiveness to the present moment, a crucial overarching theme of mindfulness and meditation. In a performative setting, the personal knowledge experienced as a result of witnessing a performance is recognised as meaningful, direct lived experience that is “so common that few of us appreciate [its] importance or make use of [its] power to change our lives” (Langer, 1991, p. 14).

Consequently, I will explore the potential of mindfulness and meditation as a relevant mental process to aid and encourage hypermnesia of the reception of a hand-painted film. The private, subjective and reflexive practice of mindfulness and meditation is theoretically significant to the reception experience as it draws attention to the ways in which lived experience is felt and the personalised knowledge that can result from it. The practice draws attention to concrete elements of lived experience, such as the thoughts, feelings, emotions and physical sensations of the self, within the embodied body, at any given moment. The partnership



of mindfulness and meditation with empirical reception practices has potential to significantly develop audiences' awareness of their reception experience and offers concrete areas of focus to support individuals in communicating important elements of their lived experience during the reception process. It could help empower the role of audience members through reception and support audiences to engage and communicate how these experiences offer personal and meaningful localised knowledge. As a result, this chapter aims to consider the practice of mindfulness and meditation within the context of empirical reception discourse to offer an innovative new method of documenting and disseminating reception experiences that could extend and increase knowledge surrounding this field of discourse.

For the hand-painted works, the relevance of mindfulness and meditation is particularly poignant because it offers a path to concrete lived experience regardless of the abstract nature of the visual images themselves. The lack of literary narrative within the hand-painted films heightens the mindful possibilities of the reception experience as it prevents us from "pay[ing] attention to the depicted scene rather than the picture itself" (Willats, 1997 p. 279). Instead, the abstract sensory content offers little representational distraction and this can promote greater awareness of an individual's own subjective experience. Additionally, it highlights the liveness of the embodied body as an active and important part of the reception process. This is in contrast to traditional literary narrative that encourages an empathetic experience of fictional characters or of performers that can disengage our own awareness of our presence and the active reception process. To return to the significance of community, this demonstrates the relevance of existing mindfulness and meditation communities to this new empirical reception methodology for the hand-painted works. Mindfulness and meditation can be practiced individually, as part of everyday experiences (e.g. mindful walking) or as a bespoke activity in itself as part of a concrete and identified community. A meditation group (or Sangha) meet with purposeful intent to gather communally and invest time and energy into the act of being present. Regardless of which structure is used, those actively engaging with mindfulness and meditation have, or are in the process of developing, the mental tools and skills required to become aware of their lived experience at any given moment. As Roger Walsh and Shauna L Shapiro suggest, "...because of their unusual psychological capacities, meditators may prove to be uniquely valuable subjects. For example, their introspective sensitivity may make them exceptional observers of subjective states and mental process" (2006, p. 234). By demonstrating such 'sensitivity' in the way of recorded conversations, a focus-group made up of individuals with mindfulness and

meditation experience could demonstrate their roles as co-creators of meaning, through the lived experience described. They can also be awarded the status of reflective participants through such demonstration of their personal and private lived experiences of everyday life, which can be applied to performance.

### *Mindfulness, Meditation and Phenomenology*

So far, across this thesis, I have used the philosophy of phenomenology (particularly that of Merleau-Ponty) when exploring experience as part of the hand-painted works. Many scholars have commented on the strong similarities between mindfulness and meditation and phenomenology whilst indicating their main differences lie with their distinct cultural origins and perspectives. Mindfulness and meditation originate from traditional Asian theological practices (as I have explored), whilst phenomenology is understood as a “mindful work of a Western kind” (Duerzen & Tantam, 2016, p. 43). Numerous similarities can be traced between the two separate concepts that are highly relevant to audience reception. This is because “Buddhist psychology and phenomenology naturally converge in their interest in discovering the operation of the mind through first-person experience, specifically by closely observing our subjective and sensory experiences” (Warren Brown and Cordon in Didonna, 2009, p. 6). Both demonstrate the significance of subjective experience in relation to knowledge, whilst also drawing attention to the present in lived experience as something worthy of personal investigation.

There are of course significant differences between the two approaches to direct experience, outside of their cultural origins. The most significant one for this study draws attention once again to the role of community. Phenomenology remains a respected and valued academic approach to experience that calls for a practical and active exploration. However, the development of meditation and mindfulness has occurred largely via religion, originating in Asia, as part of Jainism, Hinduism and Buddhism. This has resulted in the understanding of meditation, in particular, as a regular practice in its own right, as opposed to a research method. Similarly, mindfulness is essential to physical exercise activities, including yoga and Tai-Chi, which have become increasingly popular in Europe and North America throughout the twenty-first century so far. The 2016 Yoga in America Study recorded 36.7 million yoga practitioners in the U.S., an increase of 16,300,000 from 2012 alone. It estimated that 80 million more Americans would try yoga for the first time in 2016 ([https://www.yogaalliance.org/Learn/About\\_Yoga/2016\\_Yoga\\_in\\_America\\_Study/Highlights](https://www.yogaalliance.org/Learn/About_Yoga/2016_Yoga_in_America_Study/Highlights)). However, in the Western world the connection between mindfulness and meditation and

the religion of Buddhism has been less significant. Non-religious mindfulness started to develop in the late twentieth century as a result of Jon Kabat-Zinn's 'Mindfulness-Based-Stress Reduction (see Kabat-Zinn, 1990). The result is that "mindfulness-based practice methods are entering the Western cultural mainstream and becoming institutionalised approaches in public healthcare and education" (Husgafvel, V., 2016, p. 88). Thus, mindfulness and meditation is developing into a popular, mainstream approach to healthy living, rather than necessarily a religious rite. Therefore, whilst phenomenology is still a highly relevant academic approach to experiencing the hand-painted works, mindfulness and meditation offers something new. It provides an established structure for developing attention and awareness through reputable and concrete activities practiced by millions across the world. This activity requires mental and/or physical participation by individuals as a core element of the practice or exercise. As I have demonstrated, for the hand-painted works, this already popular activity could therefore offer a crucial research method, a specialist audience practice that develops the skills of attention and awareness that are required by participants in order to reflect on their personal experience of the visual narrative. More broadly, it develops an approach towards exploring inner consciousness, to develop and improve qualitative reception data of art experiences. This new reflective research method is a key area of originality offered in this thesis which, in turn, offers a crucial method to the underpinning question of this thesis- how the hand-painted works are experienced meaningfully.

#### *Existing mindfulness and meditation research across the arts*

As I have already suggested, the significance of mindfulness and meditations to the reception of the hand-painted works could also be extended across the arts more widely. Mindfulness and meditation has already become an established area of interest across the arts, although not with regard to reception. Focus so far has concentrated on the benefits of a mindful approach to performing, across disciplines. From musicians to actors, developing a mindful (aware and attentive) state for performing is increasingly being explored as a useful tool for performance development. It develops a performer's corporeal and somatic understanding of their inherently personal performing experience and state (of body and mind). In theatre and performance art, meditation and mindfulness isn't a new concept. Deborah Middleton, Co-director of the Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research at the University of Huddersfield, remarks, "At least since Stanislavski, Buddhism, yoga and other systems of spiritual development [...] have provided theatre practitioners with approaches to the training of actors' minds and bodies and to alternative philosophies and systems of thought."

(Middleton, 2017, p. 2). Middleton tracks mindfulness and meditation in the works of many performance shows including *512 Hours* by Marina Abramovic [2014], the play *Small Mouth Sounds* by Bess Wohl [2015] and the 'mindfulness opera', *Lost in Thought* by Rolf Hind [2015], (2017, p. 2). Mindfulness can also be found on the curriculum for numerous acting institutions, including the Guildhall School of Music & Drama in London, which launched an evening course on 'Mindfulness for Performers' for musicians and actors in 2013. The benefits of mindfulness for performers is considered to develop a performer's skills in "attention, perception, presence, energy, calm, readiness" to name a few (Quillici, 2017, p. 3). Through these qualities, it is suggested that performers can increase subjective awareness of their own mind and body that can develop their performative skills and the depth of their performance.

This interest in mindfulness and meditation within the arts has, so far, remained overwhelmingly focused on the working process of the performer. The connection between meditation and mindfulness and performance has largely evaded reception research, including a significant absence to the participative reception process made available to audience members in performance. Potential exceptions include two music reception studies, *Sonic Cradle* (Vidyardhi, Riecke and Gromala, 2012) and a study into classical music and mindfulness (Bell, McIntyre & Hadley, 2016) that both aim to document the relationship between mindfulness and music in participants. Whilst located in the field of music, neither study is focused on music as a live performance and, as such, is more interested in the experience (and benefits) of listening to music as an every-day activity, rather than as a mode of reception within the arts.

This thesis will therefore provide a crucial case study of how mindfulness and meditation can be used in connection to live performance in order to develop qualitative reception data. It will develop the current recognition of mindfulness and meditation across the arts, demonstrating the significance it has provided to audiences and audience experience as well as performers. So far, meditation and mindfulness has been employed within existing professional training for performers. Audiences are currently untrained and inexperienced in providing their lived experience of performance. They do not acknowledge the relevance of such subjective lived experience as completing (in that instance) their role as co-creators of meaning for a performance. This study of the hand-painted works is framing mindfulness and meditation as a potential method of training for audiences. By regularly partaking in meditation or mindfulness activities, skills of attention and awareness that are developed

can be applied to developing reflexive experience as a participant of performance-developing Jo Bucknall's concept of the 'reflexive participant' (2017).

However, before such conclusions can be drawn, new primary evidence is needed to demonstrate the reflective experience of individuals with mindfulness and meditation experience. This evidence needs to test my current hypotheses and provide this new primary data for my qualitative reception method for the hand-painted works. In order to achieve this, an investigation of this mindful methodology of audience reception was carried out in November 2017 at Southsea Sangha, Portsmouth.

## **Part Two: A qualitative focus group into the hand-painted works at Southsea Sangha**

The aim of this empirical reception investigation was to gather qualitative data, for the first time, from individuals experiencing a screening of a hand-painted film. These individuals would all have experience of meditation and/or mindfulness to explore the relevance of these themes for empirical reception practices. The investigation itself would consist of two key elements: the screening of a hand-painted film for all participants, followed by a focus-group session.

However, before designing the structure of the focus-group itself, there were two key elements to confirm: the hand-painted work that would be screened and which audience members would be participating in the investigation.

### *Choosing a hand-painted film: Persian Series 1-3*

In Chapter One, I confirmed the list of films that are part of the second stage, hand-painted collection within Brakhage's oeuvre (from p36). This included 52 purely hand-painted works (or hand-painted collections, e.g. Preludes 1-6). Spanning across four decades, this collection includes some well-known films within Brakhage's wider work such as *Black Ice* [1994], *Hell Spit Flexion* [1983] (part of *The Dante Quartet*) and *Chartres Series* [1994]. However, a key aim of this thesis is to increase the amount of interest in, and literature on, the hand-painted collection. Many of the works included within the hand-painted collection have received little or no critical attention, for reasons explored in detail in Chapter One. As such, through this investigation into the qualitative reception of the hand-painted works, I wanted to increase attention and awareness of one of these lesser-known hand-painted films- *Persian Series 1-3* [1999]. This work has received little critical attention before, therefore this study will increase the literature on this hand-painted film, demonstrating the relevance of this new method of research to an actual example of Brakhage's hand-painted style. However, it was also essential that the chosen hand-painted film was accessible for screening. As I explored in Chapter Four, the decreased production of celluloid film has resulted in fewer copies of the works being readily available. Whilst DVD collections such as The Criterion Collection ['By Brakhage: An Anthology, Volumes One and Two'] include some hand-painted works, access to less well-known hand-painted works are severely limited and result in many of the second-stage works being omitted from this practical investigation.

In addition to this limitation, it was also necessary to consider the length of a hand-painted work. Many of the films are short in length, under three minutes, due to the considerable time it took Brakhage to create them. For the qualitative reception investigation, I wanted to screen a work longer in length, for several reasons. I expected that few participants taking part in my investigation would have seen one of Brakhage's hand-painted films before due to their largely unknown identity even within the American avant-garde film network. As I have previously explored, outside of the avant-garde community, the hand-painted style is arguably a unique visual art experience. Thus, I predicted participants might benefit from a significant amount of time to experience the hand-painted style in order to engage with the visuals and consider their mindful state whilst viewing the work. By screening a longer film, or for a longer amount of time, the investigation would provide audience members with an appropriate amount of time to experience the fast-moving and brief visuals which, in turn, could improve the quality of the data received from participants.

*Persian Series 1-3* [1999]<sup>24</sup> runs for 6 minutes and 14 seconds in total. Although it provides a longer visual experience for screening, its makeup of 3 independent 'series' of films provides an accurate sense of the average length of a hand-painted film (averaging around two minutes). The series has received little critical attention to date, which perhaps resulted directly from Brakhage's own minimal discussions of the series. The title is not wholly abstract (i.e. it might suggest something exotic); however, it provides limited representational insight into the work pre-screening (and in connection to the abstract images of the work itself) and thus offers less literary influence to a participant's expectations and pre-reflections of the work. This is significant as the title of each work is displayed at the beginning of each film, meaning participants would be aware of the title of each 'movement'. Screening three films within the series also meant audience members would experience a greater range of the hand-painted styles, rhythms and production techniques that Brakhage experimented with across the collection. This could potentially give greater insight into audience perceptions towards Brakhage's hand-painted style, a direct result of the depth and breadth of the hand-painted collection. This continues to increase the awareness and attention towards the second-stage collection as a style of art, rather than a singular film, because of the higher level of engagement that participants in the study are given in experiencing the hand-painted style.

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<sup>24</sup> *Persian Series* is, in full, a collection of 18 films or parts. However, it was released in sections, such as *Persian Series 1-5*. There is a collection of *Persian Series 1-3* also available, which this thesis has used for reasons detailed.

### *Southsea Sangha*

To pilot this mindful approach to qualitative reception research, I worked in partnership with Southsea Sangha, a meditation group based in Portsmouth, England. This meditation community has been active for four years, founded in 2014. The Sangha defines itself as an “open access, peer led, Buddhist meditation group” (<http://southseasangha.com/>), which is run largely by a core group of volunteers from within the Sangha’s community. It practices the Vipassana meditation of the Threavaden Buddhist tradition, centred on mindful awareness. The depth and diversity of the Southsea Sangha made it a useful partner for this investigation. Open and inclusive to all cultures, religions and levels of experience, Southsea Sangha offered a varied community of members for this investigation, with a range of mindful and meditative histories. This includes length of experience (complete beginners to those with years of practice), level of engagement (from solo meditation, meditation groups, mindful activities such as yoga, and engaging in meditation retreats) and level of Buddhist interest (from those interested for non-spiritual reasons to those studying Buddhism). The different practices available at the Sangha is a key part of this breadth: it regularly offers a weekly, and largely informal, ‘Dharma Den’ session for those who would like to practice meditating together, as well as a more formal monthly guided meditation and dharma talk, hosted by Dharma leader, Daniel Sutton-Johanson. The Sangha also offers a range of additional meditative activities: from ‘Beach Body-sattva’ (community sit on the beach); to Refuge Recovery, an interdisciplinary mindfulness-based support group for people with a range of addictions, as well as special events with guest speakers and local retreats.

Such variety allows Southsea Sangha to offer access to an extensive range of potential participants with different levels of meditative experience for my qualitative reception investigation into the hand-painted works. Involving participants with a variety of experience of mindfulness activities (both in terms of the length of their experience and the type of mindful activities they had been part of) would help increase the depth and breadth of qualitative data captured through the investigation (this is evidenced in Appendix Four: *Focus group pre-questionnaires*). It is also a community that I have been personally involved in since January 2016 and have direct experience of. This was key in both developing the partnership with key Sangha members and promoting the investigation to members of the Sangha community. It also meant that I, as the lead investigator, had extensive knowledge of the Sangha community and its structure before the focus-group took place. Whilst this aided the design of the methodology in many ways, it also came with risks to the data



collected- which required significant thought when planning the structure of the session (as I will shortly explore).

### **The Method: Running a focus-group on Brakhage's *Persian Series 1-3***

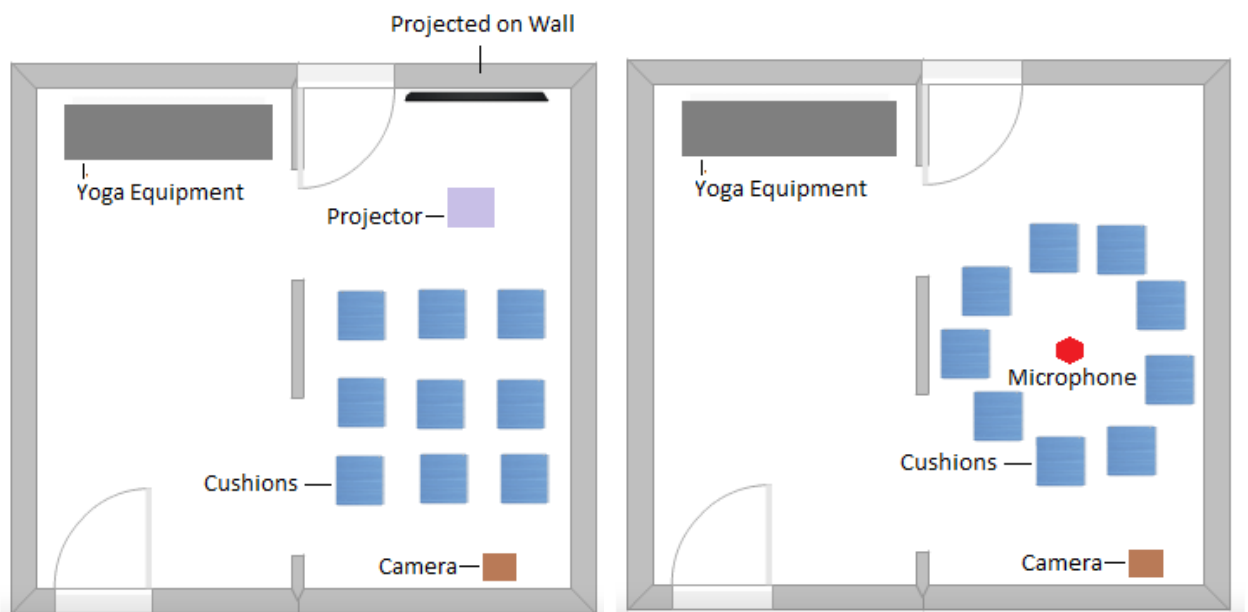
#### *The Screening*

This qualitative reception study took place on Sunday October 22<sup>nd</sup> 2018. It was located at Portsmouth Yoga Studio, Portsmouth- the official home of Southsea Sangha. The investigation took place in the evening, following straight after the weekly 'Dharma Den' session in the same studio, and lasted approximately one hour in length. Ten participants were involved in the study, all of whom were active members of the Southsea Sangha community. All participants had volunteered to take place in the investigation, which they knew would involve the screening of a short film and would explore "the relationship between meditation and art" (Appendix Three: *Promotion of the focus group in the Southsea Sangha e-newsletter*). Whilst small (10 participants), the sample size was specifically designed to be a minimum of 7 and no more than twelve participants. This size was designed to ensure enough participants for encouraging and aiding conversation, but not too many that participants couldn't contribute regularly if they wanted to. Seven has previously been highlighted (by psychologists and as indicated by Willmar Sauter) to be "an ideal number for such a 'talk-group,' because it is too big to be dominated by a single-person and too small to be divided into factions" (2000, p. 176). The significance of all participants being members of the Southsea Sangha was also highly relevant for the investigation. Not only did it ensure all members had meditation experience, but it demonstrated strongly the relevance of community to meditation practice. Whilst the Sangha community is broad and varied, the structure of the Sangha sessions encourages conversation and social activity (I will discuss the structure of Dharma Den presently). This meant many participants likely knew or recognised members of the group. Sauter sees this as a key advantage for focus groups, as it means "the step to unimpaired discussions is taken more easily" (2010, p. 244).

The venue was deliberately planned to support the relocation of the works outside of the medium of film alone, thus subverting the traditional viewing expectations of a film in cinema-like conditions. Complimenting this, the Yoga Studio not only made the investigation accessible for Sangha members, who stayed behind after the weekly Sangha session finished, but located the investigation within a mindful and meditative framing. The Sangha was something that all participants were part of and that all participants knew was key to the

project. The investigation followed the weekly meditation practice. This meant all participants had been involved in one hour of mindful and meditative activities directly before taking part in the investigation itself. By the time the focus-group started, all participants had had direct involvement in both meditation and in experiencing the film.

Fig. 1 demonstrates the layout of Southsea Sangha for the focus group. As is shown, this did not reflect a traditional film viewing set-up. Instead, participants sat on the meditation



**FIG. 1: THE LAYOUT AT SOUTHSEA SANGHA FOR THE SCREENING (LEFT) AND THE FOCUS GROUP SESSION (RIGHT)**

equipment they had just finished using for their meditation practice, which included mats, bolsters, cushions and blankets. Whilst the projector was set up, participants were invited to move their seating to somewhere where they felt comfortable but could also see the screen. This resulted in a range of different viewing physical stances- from kneeling on bolsters (a traditional meditation position), to leaning against walls or sitting on mats- that were, for the most part, more informal than a traditional film screening. Participants independently organised their seating equipment in relaxed lines facing the screening wall. Pre-questionnaires were first filled in, to capture key information about each participant; including age, gender, meditation and mindfulness experience, and any existing awareness of Stan Brakhage and his works. These forms can be found in Appendix Four: *Focus group pre-questionnaires*. The data from the pre-questionnaires demonstrated the depth of participants' meditation experiences: length of meditation experience varied from six weeks to thirteen years; diversity of experience included a range of different mindful activities from solo and group meditation, to day-long, week-long and silent meditation retreats as well as

other mindful activities such as yoga. Three participants specifically documented their mindful practice in every-day moments of life as well as more formal meditation sessions. In relation to the hand-painted works, 90% of participants stated they had not heard of Stan Brakhage or seen one of his films prior to the focus group session. This meant the focus session would capture the first experience of one of Brakhage's hand-painted works for the large majority of the group.

The film was shown with no pre-discussion or information on the film itself or the artist. This decision was consciously made to prevent pre-existing theories, expectations or perceptions impacting the experience of the participants. The session aimed to engage participants in exploring their personal and private experiences of the work. If they had no pre-conceived knowledge of Brakhage or his works, it was important this wasn't put at risk in any way by my own, or others', perceptions. Therefore, participants had been given no contextual information on the film before their viewing experience. However, *Persian Series 1-3* finishes with the following message: "This film is to be considered a collaboration with Sam Bush, optical printer at Western Cine, in the sense that I was the composer, he the visual musician". This message is included in many of the hand-painted works and provides an objective, authorial perspective that reflects on the production process of the works.

### *The Focus Group*

The structure of the focus-group was already familiar to all participants as it reflected the structure of the Sangha's regular 'Dharma Den' meditation sessions. At such sessions, after a thirty-minute meditation led by a volunteer, members of the Sangha would divide into small groups for discussion. This discussion would always be voluntary and directed (in terms of content) by the members of the group. Conversation would regularly focus on the personal experiences of the meditation session that had just taken place and an individual's personal journey of mindfulness and meditation outside of the Sangha. It is highly relevant to this empirical reception study of the hand-painted works that Sangha members are experienced in taking part in such conversations. The Dharma Den discussions that took place each week focused on an individual's personal and private recollections of their experience of meditating. Such conversations highlight the reflective nature of meditation as an independent practice of subjective awareness and presence. As a result, members of the Sangha practice the skills of exploring and reflecting on their private and inner living experience each time they attend a Sangha session. Not only does this ensure all participants

are experienced in this manner, but also results in some familiarity and awareness of the reflections requested as part of the hand-painted works focus-group.



**FIG. 2: PARTICIPANTS DURING THE FOCUS GROUP**

Following the end of the screening, participants moved into a circle to enable group conversation to begin. The focus group was recorded live, both visually and audibly. The full transcript of the focus group can be found in Appendix Six: *Focus group transcript*. All participants had been made aware of my role as researcher in the study and I acted as the facilitator for the focus group. This is in direct contrast to Willmar Sauter's 'Theatre Talks', which used independent 'group leaders' to host the session, but reflected the involvement of Karen Wood in her qualitative reception studies, who recognised the potential "by acknowledging my self-reflective thoughts [to] enrich the material" (2015, p. 30). For this practical investigation into the hand-painted works, I felt my experience and knowledge of both the Southsea Sangha and the hand-painted works could support and 'enrich' the focus-group experience for participants. It was expected that few participants would have prior experience of viewing Brakhage's works, or similar avant-garde films (which was, in turn, backed up by the pre-questionnaires that demonstrated nine out of ten participants had not viewed any of Brakhage's works before). This could result in feelings of uncertainty or anxiety for participants which could impact the quality of data received. My experience of viewing this work, and comfort with the style, might have helped put participants at ease within the focus-group and support any queries or discussion needed around the focus-group questions.

However, despite my presence and active role as leader of the focus-group, I wanted to design my engagement in the conversations to be as minimal as possible in order to preserve the distinction between the focus group and the alternate method of the interview. I wanted

to limit the effect of my presence on the discussion, being as invisible as possible to the process and the community of participants, in order to preserve the highest level of freedom and flexibility for participants. I aimed to follow Sauter's role description, that "leaders should stimulate a conversation between the participants without engaging themselves in it more than absolutely necessary. Normally they would not ask questions except for reasons of clarity or group dynamic disturbances" (2000, p. 176). In an attempt to achieve this, and to promote the control of the group in the discussion, the first stage of the focus-group gave participants an open space to offer comments, ask questions or discuss with each other anything they wanted to in light of the screening experience they had just participated in. The second half of the focus group was, however, more structured and required greater involvement on my part by posing eight questions to the group. These questions (Appendix Five: *Focus group questions*) covered a range of topics that drew conversation towards key areas of this reception study. This decision was necessary for a number of reasons. Firstly, due to the time restrictions of the focus-group: the session could not last longer than one hour (for logistical reasons for the venue and for participants), and it was important to get participant observations on the specific areas of investigation required to answer my hypotheses.

Whilst giving participants control over content was crucial, there was a key difficulty that occurred directly from this, mainly from the participants themselves. Throughout the second part of my thesis, I have focused purely on the roles and possibilities of audience members, and the significance of their reception experience. This work has demonstrated the over-reliance of traditional film expectations including authorship and narrative; and has suggested the need for this stereotypical framework for the hand-painted works to be changed. I have argued that audience members need to be more aware of their empowered position as co-creators of meaning, and the significance of their own experiences. Throughout the focus-group, a number of questions were directed towards me in relation to the artist or the objective meanings behind the works themselves. This demonstrated the significance of Brakhage's authorial perceptions to participants. Whilst any audience perspectives on such areas of conversation were relevant to their experience, and thus interesting data for the investigation, participants requesting such knowledge moved away from the central focus of this study. As a result, as the leader of the focus-group, I attempted to limit the amount of information given to participants about Brakhage and his views. This was, at many times, difficult due to participant's interest and curiosity in such areas, but was necessary so that participants' answers were not influenced by such knowledge. Where

possible, such questions were left un-explained during the focus-group and instead answered at the end of the session.

### **Qualitative audience research: Thoughts and perspectives from participants of the hand-painted works**

#### *Visual Narrative*

I will begin my analysis of audience responses by considering participant's awareness and experience of the visual narrative (as described in Chapter Four). As noted in my argument, the visual narrative of the works involves the objective content of the works- the colours, light and movement within the films. Of the three elements, movement was by far the most discussed aspect of the focus-group. The pace and direction of movement quickly became a core focus of conversation: "it was coming at you at points" [participant D]; "it was like sometimes you were travelling into it, at one point you were coming into it and then travelling out of it" [participant E]; and "it's so dynamic and then the dynamisms seem to change direction, it comes towards you and then it speeds up" [participant D]. Many of these, and similar, comments were made in the first few minutes of the focus-group, as stand-alone comments- without reference to the impact the visual narrative had made on participants. However, after this initial conversation, such comments were acknowledged alongside reflections on a participant's personal experience: Participant F noted, "I found it difficult to engage because it was too fast. And I think it was... quite different to my temperament. Where I like to focus and observe something for longer".

The pace or rhythm of the movement also emphasised differences in the subjective viewing experiences of participants. Participants A, B and E all highlighted the blackouts within the film as key to their experience in relation to the rhythm, although in differing ways. For participant A it was relaxing or enjoyable, for participant's B and E it caused anxiety or irritation. Whilst participant F disliked the fast pace of movement, for participant C this seemed an enjoyable element of the screening that went quickly and ensured their interest was maintained. Many participants witnessed changes in both the visual narrative and their experience of the visual narrative across the three 'movements' of *Persian Series 1-3*, with diverse reactions to the different parts of the film. Participant I observed changes in the pace and, as a result, with her body: "The first part I felt like I was more calm, the second and the third my heart was beating so fast [...], it was like catching me and then leaving me". Participant H had a strong dislike of *Persian I*, which felt "really severe" and "fast and closed",

but enjoyed the second movement, which was “more flowy and fluid” and “seemed wider and more kind of...uh... open”.

The concept of rhythm was questioned by participant E, who independently compared its different approach to the rhythm and structure of more conventional, commercial film.

I guess, for me, I just... compare it to film and I guess, just frustration- feelings of frustration- the way in the first film... when it goes to black that there was no rhythm, there was no rhythm to that, to what seemed like an edit, I found that very jarring. And then, yeah, just the whole non-narrative aspect of it I just... yeah I guess I found it frustrating a bit.

Participant E’s comments suggested a distinction between conventional film and *Persian Series 1-3*. Whilst acknowledging their preconceptions surrounding narrative film, the hand-painted works was comparably described by participant E as “more kind of like ‘art’”, demonstrating a distinction between the two in their mind. Other participants acknowledged their own search for representational images within the work. Participant B particularly highlighted their difficulty with the lack of recognisable images, noticing they were “constantly trying to interpret the images that were coming up” with no success. This was understood by the participant as a direct result of there being “no narrative”, which meant “I was looking to interpret a lot more”. They admitted in a traditional art setting, they would be “looking around for a little plaque to try and explain it. If I couldn’t find one, I’d just move on and forget about it I think.”

Aside from participant I, there were no comments that mentioned colour or light, the two other elements of the visual narrative. In contrast, the concept of visual music (a well-known term within the avant-garde world and widely referenced in academia on Stan Brakhage) was brought up because of the confusion it created. Many participants didn’t understand the musical reference in light of the silent images. Participant I, for whom English wasn’t a first language, exclaimed, “It said something about painted music but there wasn’t any music! How do you say about the colourful music, ok I was confused, maybe it was the language”. Similarly, participant A explained “I really, really wanted music and I was getting a bit pissed off that there wasn’t music at some points.” In this example, participant A compared the hand-painted work to a previous art experience that successfully combined both visual art and music. This, in turn, highlighted the absence of music in this example of the hand-painted works. Whilst the predicament of visual music was discussed by various members of the group, none could understand the reference to music. The only exception was participant G, for whom *Persian Series II* reminded them of music. They mentioned the rhythm which they expressed “like poetry almost”.

### *Lived experience*

Throughout the focus-groups, participants offered a range of reflections on the physical and emotional elements of their experience of *Persian Series 1-3*. Many of these involved negative feelings or thoughts: participant H discussed their “desire to look away” and “noticed the urge to avoid” the images; for participant I it made their heart beat faster and faster until they realised “I had to breathe... like [breathes deeply] like phew ok, I’m here, it’s ok”. Participant A detailed in great detail their physical experience during *Persian Series II*: “... but I noticed in the second one there was a bit of tension in the back of my throat... Oddly, my breathing by the second one had really kind of calmed down but I noticed that... the back of my throat was quite tense which, I didn’t really understand why but I noticed that.”

Many other physical and emotional observations were connected to specific moments of lived experience for participants. Participant B suggested their dislike of the blackouts was likely related to their work and previous experience with technology. They explained, “I think...um... possibly because I worked a lot in technology and presentations, as soon as I see something go out I’m not sure if it’s not working or if something’s broken, I got a jolt every time something blacked out.” This suggested very specific memory recall and empathy with previous lived experience on behalf of the participant. The feelings of stress this developed while viewing the hand-painted work suggested the memories it recalled were linked to feelings of stress and anxiety in relation to job performance. For participant H the viewing experience strongly evoked memories of the effects of drugs: “It’s *just* like doing acid, that second one [...], sniffing glue just makes you kind of like go into this weird kind of... but it’s not art, it’s just all in your own mind”. This description was particularly interesting as it showed the great extent to which the visuals of the hand-painted work evoked memories of concrete and specific lived experience for participant H. The similarity of the two contradicted with the two different categories of art and life that the participant assumed both belonged to respectively. Participant J’s lived experience description most closely aligns with the artist, Stan Brakhage himself. At the end of the session they explained:

I go on the train a lot to Brighton. Sometimes you get on the wrong side and you see- if you shut your eyes because of the sun, it’s exactly like that, isn’t it, just sort of changes... [...] and the bits where it doesn’t quite come into focus is quite annoying because you just want to see it.

This description is closely aligned to Brakhage’s own methodology of closed-eye vision- the visual effect of light felt through the closed eyelid and experienced by the individual. A similar example also bears resemblance to Brakhage’s own experiences. In Chapter Two, I explored



the significance of nature as a reoccurring theme across the hand-painted collection. For participant D, *Persian Series 1-3* also recalled thoughts of nature: “It reminded me quite a lot of nature sort of, it looked- it reminded me a lot of a flame or maybe water. Sort of the speed of it, like the flickering of a flame, a bit like that. And actually I found that quite pleasant to look at.” This example is interesting also as it doesn’t recall a particular memory or moment of lived experience. Instead it suggested something broader- the participant’s use of the word “reminded” suggests the visual’s ability to capture or embody the sense or a quality of nature. This interpretation is particularly made possible due to the perhaps conscious change of wording within the sentence- instead of looking like a flame (in terms of representation) the term ‘reminded’ suggests the quality of nature within the image.

### *Meditation*

A key aim of this focus-group was to explore the significance of meditation and mindfulness practice as a relevant tool for audiences in engaging with the live, present moment of viewing performance. Accordingly, exploring any meditation-related perceptions of participants through the focus-group session was of great interest and was a crucial question to put to the focus-group. A number of participants independently offered direct observations between their viewing experience of the hand-painted film and meditation. Participant A offered multiple comments that suggested a strong relationship between their experience of the film and their meditation practice. The blackouts within the film evoked a direct comparison to mental processes:

*Participant A: The first one, I was kind of, it just, it really resonated with me actually, just kind of- the business of the mind and then the breaks in that, and the intonation throughout, I really liked that one.*

*VS: So it reminded you of a mental state?*

*Participant A: Yeah definitely in my earlier days and then the black outs of stepping out of that and then coming back again*

Whilst clearly linked to inner thought, this could also be a direct comment on meditation. By “earlier days”, participant A could be referring to their early experiences of meditation. The language used throughout this segment of conversation suggests the phases of awareness and lost concentration (“business of the mind”) that is a core element of mindfulness. The

repetitive structure of this coming and going reflects closely the practice of mindfulness and meditation- making oneself aware of the present moment by “interrupting the automatic flow of our actions and thoughts” (Andre, 2014, p. 24). Participant A’s physical awareness of their body during the viewing experience could also be considered relevant to meditation practice. This level of detail- noticing tension in the back of the throat, the speed of breathing- highlights a level of self-awareness and presence that is a crucial aim for mindfulness and meditation practice. Participant A’s later comment on the same moment of experience, “Nothing really stood out as to why”, demonstrates not just physical awareness but activity on behalf of the participant throughout the viewing: they attempted to explore the reasons behind the physical discomfort, despite nothing particularly standing out.

Participant I’s focus on the speed of the heartbeat and the physical act of breathing suggests similar connections to mindfulness and meditation. The increased rate of the heartbeat is independently felt by the participant, in enough detail that the feeling is attributed to the changes in rhythm and tempo between the first and second movements of the film. Participant I describes the mental process that took place at that live moment of experiencing and their realisation that they need to breathe and acknowledge “I’m here, it’s ok.” This also strongly reflects a key element of mindfulness- being grounded in the present moment. Participant I also offered a more direct observation between the experience of viewing the hand-painted work and meditation. They explained:

I think because [...] I didn’t see colour when I was in meditation, I’m pretty sure from now on when I’m going to do the meditation I’m going to be in the same stage, I don’t know why but I feel I’m going to see colour. Because I was infused with so many colours, so many images, that I’m pretty sure if I do meditation now, I think if I close my eyes I’m going to see those colours.

This not only demonstrates the relevance of meditation to the hand-painted films for participant I, but already suggests the viewing experience will have a reflexive impact on their meditation experience from now on: they expect colours will play a part in their meditation experience where previously they didn’t. Therefore, the viewing experience was meaningful for the participant in regards to her meditation practice, suggesting a reflexive and dynamic relationship between the acts of participation and meditation. This demonstrates the cyclical relationship available between the reflexive experience of the hand-painted works and meditation. Viewing the film can impact the living experiences associated with everyday life, outside of an art context, as the viewing experience becomes part of the participant’s lived experience and corporeality.

Other participants also referred to the venue space at Portsmouth Yoga as having a direct impact on their experience. Participant F acknowledged the calm state of mind they were in following the weekly meditation session. Participant B couldn't identify their meditation practice specifically as relevant to their viewing experience. However, they did acknowledge the impact of the Sangha environment: "the fact that I watched it in a kind of calm environment, and after I knew I was already calm after meditation...". This suggested the meditation space had impacted the quality of the experience. They acknowledged their experience would have been different if they had received the link at work, suggesting that viewing the film in a different context would have resulted in a different mental state that would not have been so open or appropriate for the art experience. Participant B acknowledges the previous meditation practice as a comparative context to work that enabled a calm mental state for viewing the work. Participant F also reflected this in noting the contrast between her calm mental state and the fast, busy visuals of the film.

#### **Developing empirical reception approaches to the hand-painted works: demonstrating subjective experience through mindfulness and meditation**

This practical investigation set out to achieve two key things. First and foremost, it aimed to provide qualitative data concerning audience members' experience of a hand-painted film for the first time to evidence the subjective and reflective experiences of the performance. Secondly, it intended to investigate the reflective experiences of participants with mindfulness and meditation experience in order to explore the significance of mindfulness and meditation communities for qualitative reception research. The conversations recorded through the Southsea Sangha focus-group investigation successfully provided new qualitative data on the reception experiences of the ten participants. Through their conversations, subjective and reflective thoughts and experiences of the lived experience of the hand-painted film were demonstrated. Through these personal and unique perceptions, participants evidenced their co-creative and active participation of the viewing. Despite the abstraction of the works, the conversations that took place demonstrated concrete and personal perceptions unique to each participant. These perceptions and experiences were individual, different and often contradictory to other participants' experiences. The visual narrative was experienced in different ways: physical effects were felt- such as an increased heart rate, tension in different parts of the body and even recognition of the need to breathe; whilst mentally and emotionally the images resulted in mixed feelings of like and dislike, and calmness and frustration. The relevant memories from past lived experience shared within

the group confirmed the relevance of subjective experience in light of the abstract visuals. These differed from art and cultural, to social and recreational experiences and even to nature, showing a depth and breadth of relevance between the visuals and wider living experience. Participants also demonstrated the embodied effects of these memories on their viewing experience- such as participant B, whose career in technology resulted in recollections of anxious and stressful moments, and led to a dislike or discomfort of witnessing the black outs within the film. The memories of lived experience didn't just encourage recollections, they had a holistic affect, drawing on aspects of the participants' corporeality from beyond the moment of the art experience. Therefore, the focus group demonstrated that individual and subjective lived experience play a vital part in participants meaningfully engaging with the abstract visuals of *Persian Series 1-3*.

The qualitative data received also evidenced the significance of mindfulness and meditation to these subjective and reflective experiences. Participants A and I demonstrated a particularly strong awareness of this presence that they connected to their meditation and mindfulness experience. Participant A experienced a manifestation of their meditation experience within the visual narrative. The rhythm of the moving visuals and blackouts was experienced as a visual representation of their practice- signifying the disruption of moments of mindfulness with thoughts and feelings. This representation was both concrete and subjective- no other participants voiced or offered visible evidence that they had shared this perception. The objectively abstract visuals had therefore become concrete on a highly personal level, in the same way as the films were subjectively concrete for Brakhage. This shared perception from participant A therefore established one way in which the visual narrative was experienced meaningfully in light of meditation, in that instance completing one subjective example of the art process through their participation. Participant I instead offered reflexive thoughts on the impact the screening would have on their meditation practice. This example doesn't detail the reason for the connection between the screening and meditation but does suggest its relevance. The participant's certainty from now on they are "going to be in the same stage" suggests some similarity or relevance between their viewing experience and their wider experience of mindfulness and meditation. It confirms that, from the viewer's perspective, the lived experience of witnessing and participating in the screening of the hand-painted film will directly impact their future lived experience of meditation. This evidences a cyclical relationship between the meaningful knowledge learnt through art reception and the relevant implications such knowledge has for the way in which the wider concept of lived experience is considered and understood.

These two examples offer clear evidence of the connection between the viewing of the hand-painted works and the practice of meditation for these two participants. However, outside of these examples, it was the high level of participants' awareness of their live experience that is of great interest to this investigation, as I will now explore. The diverse data gathered on physical and emotional experiences of the hand-painted film demonstrates participants' corporeal knowledge of their own experiences. Many conversations within the focus group demonstrated the alien qualities of the film for this audience- from the concept of visual music to the search for representation within the painted images. However, despite many participants' acknowledgment that they'd "never seen anything like [the hand-painted work]" [participant A], the abstract and alien qualities of the film did not prevent participants from exploring and discussing their unique experiences in a detailed and meaningful way.

It is through the collection of such data that this bespoke empirical reception methodology for the hand-painted works achieves one of the critical aims of this thesis: it evidences the existence of individual and subjective meaningful experiences of audience members through the active and participative act of reception. It has demonstrated that empirical reception research can be used as a method to empower the relevance of audience experience by drawing attention to the actual voices of everyday audience members. For the hand-painted works, this is so important because conventional analytical approaches, focused on the production process, offered such underwhelming understanding of meaningful engagement with the works themselves. In this thesis, it is through these subjective audience experience descriptions that I have been able to evidence that subjective, meaningful experiences of the artworks have (and can) take place. This, in turn, demonstrates that the hand-painted works can be meaningful for audience members, despite the high level of abstraction and the unique aesthetic of the works (visual narrative) that had previously limited discussion on them.

However, this result also has important repercussions outside of merely the hand-painted collection. It offers crucial new developments in the field of reception study. Firstly, it continues to develop the field of reception study as a credible, contrasting approach to conventional production-based methods of art analysis. By emancipating audience experience, it widens the notion of art appreciation outside of "the control of hierarchical interpretative gatekeeping" (Lynne Conner in Sant, 2017, p. 119). It does this by encouraging actual, direct contact with audience members in order to capture their subjective, reception experiences. Developing this field of study, and the significance of audience experience, will

continue to breakdown the stigma of an audience as a single entity, increasing awareness of the depth and diversity of the study of reception. Additionally, this thesis has offered a new development to the field of (empirical) reception studies through a methodology centred on the practice of mindfulness and meditation. The significance of mindfulness and meditation is broader than simply Brakhage's second-stage collection. Instead, this methodology seeks to answer a critical weakness of existing reception academia: how do audience members share their meaningful experience? Mindfulness and meditation offers a vital approach to exploring the act of hypermnosis, recalling the impact of the reception experience of the individual. Mindfulness and meditation, as a practice, offers helpful tools and approaches to observing and becoming aware of subjective experience. In the focus group at Southsea Sangha, participants (with experience of mindfulness and meditation) demonstrated through their conversations their active invisible participation during the screening, and their awareness of this participation. Their status of co-creators of meaning was evidenced through the sharing of these highly personal experiences and the rich, qualitative comments that resulted, that drew on lived experience (including physical stimulations, mental process, recollections, emotions and memories). This provided the vital yet previously missing link between the abstract hand-painted works and lived experience.

However, it is acknowledged that this qualitative study cannot, alone, prove that such observational awareness is a direct result of experience within the field of mindfulness and meditation. Outside of participant's own direct acknowledgement of this connection, it can only be predicted that such qualities of astute corporeal awareness are linked to the experience of mindfulness and meditation activities. This study therefore provides key initial evidence on the relevance of mindfulness and meditation to qualitative reception studies in performance. But it also highlights a number of crucial future developments, which I will now consider, that could offer further insight into the impact of mindfulness and meditation experience in regard to reception experience. Overall, further investigation is needed to ascertain the level of significance that mindfulness and meditation offers to empirical reception studies. This could be best demonstrated by running focus-groups with audiences who have no experience of meditation and mindfulness, and comparing the sets of qualitative data received. This would, admittedly, be a complex task; attempting to analyse different sets of data that subjectively explore the "wide, complicated, rich, messy, fascinating processes that actual audience members go through in understanding, valuing, responding to and finding meaning" (Bucknall & Sedgeman, 2017, p. 121). However, attempting this task might provide valuable evidence of the role of meditation and

mindfulness experience, whilst continuing to increase the amount of qualitative reception data available on the hand-painted works from a greater diversity of audiences and communities. Similarly, segregating participants with different levels and methods of mindfulness and meditation experience could further evidence the impact of this community. This will explore the identity of the mindfulness and meditation community in greater detail (although analysing such data could be complex).

Additionally, the current sample size of this qualitative reception project of the hand-painted works is of course extremely limited. Further focus-groups on the hand-painted films would increase the level of empirical data received and enable discussion on greater patterns of subjective experience responses. Expanding this qualitative method through further focus-groups would enable wider analysis of subjective experiences, expanding the significance and relevance of such qualitative reception studies for the hand-painted works in the process. Focusing on different meditation and mindfulness communities, both geographically and outside of Vipassana meditation, would also increase the currently narrow parameters of this study, offering additional primary evidence relating to the relevance of meditation and mindfulness to reception studies. Such further developments would help to confirm the relevance of mindfulness and meditation on a broader scale. It would also enable further conclusions to be reached on how this practice can be adopted more widely, expanding the quality and quantity of reception studies in the arts.

## Conclusion

This thesis originally set out to correct the significant absence of awareness, understanding and critical discussion of Brakhage's hand-painted films. I aimed to establish the under-explored hand-painted style within Brakhage's oeuvre as a distinct artistic entity in its own right, separate in critical ways from his earlier, renowned films. I also intended to uncover *how* the hand-painted works could be set apart from these earlier films in order to understand the painted collection better. In addition, this thesis also intended to critique the limited and, I felt, misleading approach taken by existing literature on the painted films. As a result, I initially set out to reconsider the relevance of the avant-garde critical approach to the hand-painted films and instead investigate alternative methods of scholarship that might offer creative, much-needed solutions for this body of work.

I want to suggest that, in investigating these aims, this thesis has offered an original contribution of knowledge to the fields of film, interdisciplinary study and to performance. I have offered a new understanding of Brakhage and, more explicitly, his hand-painted collection of works by challenging existing assumptions within film, particularly towards the avant-garde film movement. In identifying the weaknesses of an avant-garde film academic lens, and the impact on the reception of the works, I have broadened the parameters of the second-stage collection outside of their conventional medium. I have developed a unique interdisciplinary landscape for the works that highlights the relevance of other media for both the processes of production and reception. Finally, I have offered a new reception methodology for the hand-painted works that extends current scholarship on the qualitative reception experience of audiences through the practice of mindfulness and meditation.

At the start of this thesis, I introduced three key propositions. These themes consisted of the identity, an interdisciplinary investigation and a new epistemic approach to the hand-painted works. I will now review the original contribution of knowledge that this thesis has offered, through these three themes.

### The identity

This theme set out, first and foremost, to *identify a new and unique understanding of a body of works that have received little critical attention historically*. Prior to this study, the hand-painted films were not known as a distinct collection of works within Brakhage's oeuvre.



Instead, this thesis has offered an important area of originality in the shape of the most comprehensive identification of the individual works made using the hand-painted style (both 'pure' and 'extended'), which make up the hand-painted collection. I have also evidenced the severely under-explored and under-examined nature of the second-stage collection in connection with their historic framing within the avant-garde film movement. The absence of critical attention, I have shown, is linked to the modernist, romantic and personal context of avant-garde film that was celebrated in the 1960s but which experienced an irreversible decline in the late 1970s. The hand-painted works were, consequently, largely irrelevant within avant-garde film at the time of their production.

As a result, this thesis has argued that the hand-painted style of filmmaking received little insightful analysis through this romantic and personal consideration of film. Instead, it has been incorrectly aligned with the motivations and critical approaches of an earlier mode of lyrical filmmaking within the avant-garde movement, largely because of Brakhage's own significance to this earlier style of film. This assumption had not previously been challenged, there has been no identification of the contrasting nature of these two particular styles within Brakhage's oeuvre. I have acknowledged the need to distinguish between these two styles of avant-garde filmmaking through the development of two new terms for Brakhage's oeuvre: the first stage (camera) and second stage (painted) works. Through the concept of the second stage collection, this thesis has contributed original knowledge on Stan Brakhage. I have evidenced the depth and diversity of Stan Brakhage's oeuvre to a previously unrecognised extent. I have confirmed the existence of the painted style as a unique and distinct collection of films in the later decades of the artist's career and life, which is worthy of further study. This has been achieved in this study through an exploration of the unique and alternative elements that distinguish the hand-painted works from the earlier camera-made lyrical films. I have demonstrated that the production method, style, aesthetics and visual methodology offer a distinct approach from Brakhage's earlier camera works and, more widely, to 'conventional' avant-garde filmic practices.

Not only has this helped separate the two stages in terms of their aesthetic nature, it has emphasised the unique qualities of the hand-painted works more broadly in avant-garde film. The relevance of the absent camera equipment further isolated the hand-painted collection from the large majority of avant-garde film practice. As this thesis has shown, the significance of the camera to film is critical. It has become a staple piece of equipment that has dictated much of the interest and understanding of both film practice and theory. The

photographic and representational qualities of camera-made film images have resulted in a reliance and expectation of literary communication through film. Even avant-garde film, developed to challenge Hollywood cinematic approaches, has done so through the distortion, but persistence, of representation, recognition and traditional narrative expectations. Consequently, this thesis has argued that the existing avant-garde location of the hand-painted works has not enabled a fruitful study of the second stage collection. Instead it has furthered the critical neglect of this body of works. Avant-garde critique has not offered a critical approach that fits or enables conversation of the non-representational and non-photographic qualities of the films and, therefore, the aesthetic nature of the artworks as films.

On a localised level, this thesis is centred on the works and legacy of one filmmaker located within the historical American avant-garde movement. However, this research has wider implications that highlight the complications of critical fashions of discourse. This thesis has identified a historical weakness in film studies by challenging the historic parameters of a modernist movement within the arts. As this thesis has demonstrated, modernism encouraged the definition of art movements, which emphasised the separation and segregation of art in line with the qualities of the movement. Brakhage's hand-painted works suffered in two ways. Firstly, from their unfortunate historic location, towards the end of the personal, romantic pulse of avant-garde film. The confinement of the works within the modernist avant-garde prevented retrospective analysis as these works were considered outdated and out of fashion, even within an alternative film movement. This has prevented earlier considerations of the possibilities of the hand-painted collection outside of their original location, and connection to, earlier avant-garde film perspectives. Secondly, the hand-painted works have suffered from the segregation of the avant-garde into movements within movements. Not just contained to the modernist approach to avant-garde film, I have highlighted the collection's assumed significance to an earlier understanding of modernist avant-garde film, through the personal and romantic qualities of the lyrical film. This, I have argued, is an incorrect location for the second stage collection. Despite still championing romantic and personal film, the alternative non-camera approach (amongst other stylistic, thematic and methodological differences) sets this later collection apart in a significant way. However, once again the expectations of avant-garde film styles prevented a genuine consideration of the aesthetic of the hand-painted works.

With hindsight, these arguments illuminate the restrictive, powerful effect of the avant-garde movement. The modernist labels of the movement dictated the history of independent film and dictated the historical parameters of what has been understood as 'avant-garde'. These celebrated styles of filmmaking have influenced the directions and attentions of the movement, ironically developing a 'mainstream' approach to avant-garde filmmaking. As the hand-painted works demonstrated, other works or approaches to film that did not fit neatly into this notion of avant-garde film were at risk of being ignored. This suggests that other filmmakers and works from this period may have suffered from similar neglect as a result of incorrect labelling and locating. Of particular interest for further study would be other filmmakers, making avant-garde works at a similar time, who defied representation and developed abstract works in some or all of their works. Possible examples include Tony Conrad, Jennifer Reeves, Harry Smith and brothers James and John Whitney. These artists share many poignant similarities to Brakhage's works, methods and visual ethos as a result of their non-camera or non-representational methods of filmmaking. Such exploration could open up a new approach within avant-garde filmmaking which has been ignored. Developing awareness of this area of filmmaking could help break down the representational stigma of film and encourage much-needed diversity of film in this area. This would support new approaches to film academia that don't depend on literary narrative and imitation, extending the reach of film practices and film theory.

For Brakhage, however, this thesis concluded that there was no relevant solution *within* the existing framework of the film medium because these historical restrictions have been left unchallenged. In considering the developments of other media, this may well identify a critical weakness of film that has left it severely outdated and at risk in the current postmodernist, flexible and diverse art landscape. When contrasted with other media, this thesis has highlighted the need for more flexibility and diversity within film scholarship, particularly in relation to the role and significance of the camera, to ensure film academia does not merely support one conventional, literary understanding of film.

### **An interdisciplinary investigation**

My theme surrounding interdisciplinary investigation aimed to *re-analyse the significance of existing film and avant-garde approaches to create an eclectic methodology that moves beyond specific media and standard philosophical positions between film and other visual art*. I aimed to use interdisciplinary investigation to further evidence the problematic location of

the hand-painted works within the medium of film, offering creative solutions through relevant examples in other media. These examples focused around the abstract, non-representational nature of the works which film scholarship could not support.

Throughout, this thesis has developed a new interdisciplinary methodology and location for the hand-painted collection. I have offered a new, original approach to, and understanding of, the hand-painted style by embedding a range of examples, approaches and developments in other media outside of film. In exploring the hand-painted films as interdisciplinary products, relevant connections have been made to the media of painting (through Abstract Expressionism), poetry and music. These disciplines have provided vital examples of abstraction in art in order to overcome the expectations of representation and imitation in film scholarship. Instead, they have demonstrated how other art media promote subjective, meaningful art experiences through non-representational communication. By preventing objective signals of communication, I have surmised that abstract artworks can only draw attention to the objective makeup of the artworks; in Brakhage's case the visual elements of the films. In other words, the hand-painted films can be explored as images of abstract colour moving through light. In turning such critical thoughts into a practical methodology, this thesis has added an original contribution to knowledge by extending Brakhage's request for a *visual* narrative. In contrast to literary approaches to narrative, the visual narrative has been presented as an alternative understanding of story, because "[T]here are, quite simply, meanings that are better expressed visually or musically than verbally" (Laure-Ryan, 2004, p. 12). The visual narrative of the hand-painted works results in a visual but abstract language of communication that can only support personal and subjective experiences of meaning. For the hand-painted works this language is, I have argued, visual music. This thesis has re-located the concept of visual music from film to an interdisciplinary understanding that brings together the abstract yet subjective possibilities of visual and musical art. Through visual music, I have presented a new interdisciplinary methodology that caters for the abstract aesthetic nature of the second stage films.

This study of the visual narrative for the hand-painted films has evidenced an original approach to interdisciplinary study. My interdisciplinary approach has been applied as a direct solution to the weaknesses and limitations of film scholarship. Existing film academia offered no support for examining how abstract, non-narrative works can be considered as offering meaningful art experiences. Interdisciplinary investigation has instead demonstrated concretely that abstract artwork can be meaningful when the boundaries of media are broken

down and challenged. Questioning the parameters of film scholarship enabled helpful insights from other media that have achieved the aesthetic results required for the hand-painted films.

As a result, this study offered the first relocation of the hand-painted works outside of film from an academic, critical perspective. The wider impact of this line of enquiry in my thesis was an expansion of the possibilities of film. Interdisciplinary analysis has changed the academic perspective of the hand-painted works whilst continuing to recognise them as films. Therefore, an interdisciplinary critical location has theoretically expanded the possibilities of what film is and what film can achieve. Through visual music, the hand-painted films have achieved the aesthetics of music; a non-representational, non-objective piece of art that requires a subjective outlook in relation to the manner in which it communicates. Thus, the hand-painted films, through an interdisciplinary lens, can be seen to extend the concept of film and, more specifically, avant-garde film. This additionally emphasises an important limitation of existing filmic academia, which enforces approaches that are too narrow and which restrict the possibilities of the medium. For the hand-painted works this limited the practical interest in this style which, in turn, might likely have impacted the level of practical filmmaking and investigation into this area. In other words, the limited methodologies for film scholarship have limited the potential of the film medium. Through my interdisciplinary methodology, this study has highlighted the need for greater flexibility, diversity and originality within film scholarship. Achieving this aim would ensure film academia does not merely support and encourage a conventional, photographic and literary approach to film. Instead, it would extend the avant-garde ethos to investigate and expand the true possibilities of the film medium. This current weakness can be considered a failure of the avant-garde film movement. In order to understand the visual possibilities of the hand-painted films (and, through them, the medium of film) the works had to be relocated outside of film and seek answers from other media. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach to extend the possibilities of the film medium is somewhat contradictory. It highlights the ambiguity of what the avant-garde film movement aimed to achieve and what the movement's critical approaches has recognised avant-garde film for. Further interdisciplinary investigations would help to identify the intermedial qualities of films and, consequently, further limitations of film theory. Camera-less film offers one unconventional method for widening the parameters of film theory. An interdisciplinary investigation into other similar approaches (both within or outside of avant-garde film) would continue to break down and extend existing barriers within the film medium. This would enhance the diversity and depth of film scholarship.

This study's interdisciplinary investigation into the hand-painted collection has also highlighted the meaningful possibilities of this approach *when applied correctly*. Outside of my example of the hand-painted works, my study has argued that interdisciplinary study has not always been adopted in this way. Instead, I have challenged the existing landscape of interdisciplinary study as an unhelpful term that adds little in the way of insightful knowledge. I have argued it has been incorrectly used as a descriptive label to merely reference the crossing of art boundaries, with no understanding of how or why. To exacerbate this problem, the broad nature of interdisciplinary, and the correct hesitancy to define it further, has prevented appropriate safeguarding of this term. Instead, interdisciplinary has regularly become synonymous with multimedia and the use of multiple media within artworks. As I have argued, this broadens the notion of interdisciplinary to the point of unhelpfulness, as a case can be made for the interdisciplinary nature through the mere inclusion of sound, written dialogue etc. The result is that interdisciplinary has become a meaningless term. It does not offer new knowledge or extend current ways of thinking.

This thesis has challenged the broadness of interdisciplinary investigation by redefining the term. Whilst I have maintained the concept as a diverse and flexible practice (see p112), I have addressed the misconception that multidisciplinary work falls under this line of critical thought. My extended definition of interdisciplinary therefore moves beyond simply an understanding of what an interdisciplinary investigation seeks to achieve, which must remain broad and inclusive. Through this extension, I argue that identifying something as interdisciplinary is only the first step. In order to develop interdisciplinary knowledge into a meaningful and deep field of enquiry, a subjective study or discussion must ensue to explain how something is interdisciplinary: what are the boundaries that it explores, how does it challenge or engage them and what is the impact of this new knowledge. This, I have argued, is achieved through a bespoke case study of interdisciplinary investigation into an artwork. This thesis offers a suggested structure and approach to this case study for the hand-painted works, which has helped to define the area of interdisciplinary work into the field of visual music. Future developments into interdisciplinary investigation could consist of further individual case studies into other artworks, exploring different art boundaries. The development of more interdisciplinary case studies would enable a greater level of analysis across interdisciplinary academia whilst maintain the meaningful and relevant quality of such individual studies.

Finally, in a similar vein to the overall understanding of interdisciplinary study, this thesis has extended the existing concepts of visual narrative and visual music, which make up the hand-painted work's new interdisciplinary location. Both terms existed in the original era of modernist, romantic and personal avant-garde film. As I have demonstrated, the existence of a visual narrative was championed by Brakhage himself. However, both terms required retrospective investigation because of the limited exploration and understanding of these terms in the twentieth century. Despite Brakhage's reference, visual narrative has remained an overlooked area of research that has not been sufficiently built on since Brakhage's mention of it in the 1990s. This study has offered one potential understanding of visual narrative, in light of abstract painted artworks. The second stage works particularly thrive under this visual approach to narrative because of their non-representational qualities. However, a visual consideration of narrative offers much more extensive potential across the arts, including objective and representational films. Visual narrative might even offer new approaches to conventional, Hollywood film by promoting film analysis that prioritises the visual impact of images whilst demoting the significance of images in relation to overall literary story. Further investigations that uncover different artworks that can be explored through visual narrative would help to develop this academic method. Significantly, this would help achieve one of Brakhage's most crucial aims, the impact of seeing over thinking through film.

The concept of visual music links particularly closely to my wider conclusions surrounding interdisciplinary investigation. This study has highlighted existing uses of the term 'visual music', particularly in relation to the hand-painted films. However, the term turned out to be largely descriptive, connected to both Brakhage's first and second stage, and it offered limited understanding of how the film images were musical and the impact of this musical quality. Again, I have developed a more comprehensive understanding of visual music through the example of the hand-painted films. This case study highlighted important musical vocabulary that embodied the moving visual images. As my discussion of *Lovesong* demonstrated (see p131), this provided a running commentary of the visual narrative of the film, proving that visual story can be achieved in abstract artworks.

These new and comprehensive analyses of existing interdisciplinary terms have been made possible through retrospective investigation. As part of my overall interdisciplinary investigation, I have confirmed and qualified the relevance of the past terms of visual narrative and visual music for the hand-painted films. Whilst these terms existed within the film medium, an interdisciplinary approach has ensured these terms have been applied meaningfully to

provide much-needed answers to the previous lack of analysis. In contrast, a filmic understanding of these terms did not yield significant academic discoveries. This returns us back to a larger conclusion of this thesis; challenging historical and traditional approaches to art. For reasons all connected to the identity of the second-stage collection, the notions of visual narrative and visual music did not thrive in their original historic context against the setting of the avant-garde film movement. Reconsidering these approaches outside of their traditional art context has enabled clearer understanding of their limitations and the overall restrictive impact of the avant-garde film movement. This continues to identify weaknesses within avant-garde film directly through its modernist framing of movements and labels and, consequently, further qualifies the relocation of the hand-painted works outside of film.

### **A new epistemic approach**

The final theme of this thesis was to offer the first, original methodology exclusively for approaching the hand-painted works. Through this theme, I hoped that *the limitations of existing research and academic approaches would help shape a new methodology that considers how the artworks can be experienced meaningfully*. Thus, out of my academic conclusions surrounding the identity and interdisciplinary investigation of the hand-painted films, I hoped to offer a new epistemic approach. This aimed to answer the crucial problems of the collection's limited relevancy and theoretical interest within their previous avant-garde film context.

Offering a new interdisciplinary location through both the visual narrative and visual music was a crucial first step in meeting this aim. By framing the works outside of existing filmic critical approaches, this thesis was able to design a methodological approach based around the abstract, non-representational nature of the painted images. These aspects of the collection's aesthetics, I have argued substantially, had not received sufficient attention or analysis, or simply been recognised as an important part of the aesthetic of the works. However, the visual narrative alone related to the hand-painted artworks as art products, devoid of human interaction or perspective. Thus, an important aim for a new epistemic approach to the collection was to examine how the abstract artworks were received and experienced by audience members.

This thesis has contributed to knowledge of the hand-painted films by offering a new epistemological methodology to reception. Born from an interdisciplinary analysis of reception as a process, I have used crucial reception insights in the historical development of performance



from the 1960s (Happenings and Fluxus) to argue for analysis of the live, participative and performative qualities of film reception experiences. I have emphasised the relevance of audiences in this study by promoting them as emancipated spectators and co-creators of meaning. I have argued that it is this live and participative reception experience that enables the visual narrative to be completed. It is completed on an individual basis; each audience member offers their own unique and subjective approach to the works which demystifies the concept of meaningful experience to the hand-painted films. Therefore, through reception I have concluded the argument for abstract art, offering a pathway from objective abstraction to subjective meaning through audience experience. I have demonstrated that the visual narrative of the hand-painted works can be experienced uniquely and individually.

However, this thesis has also criticised existing reception approaches that merely offer such a theoretical solution. Whilst this is sound in considering audience experience, such abstract discussion of personal experience contradicts the critical aim of reception studies to emancipate the role and experiences of audiences. Therefore, theoretical and hypothetical discussion of audience's personal reception experiences are not enough. In order to access these unique, subjective reception experiences, this thesis has argued for a new infrastructure for audience engagement that promotes direct contact with audience members. This infrastructure has been achieved through the design and testing of the first empirical and qualitative reception method for the hand-painted works. My qualitative reception method has made an original contribution to knowledge of qualitative reception studies by offering a new solution to helping audience members recognise and communicate hypermnesis. I have argued for the innovative impact of the practice of mindfulness and meditation as a solution to Pettimengin's challenge: "Who amongst us would be able to describe spontaneously and precisely the lived experience associated with his recollection decision, reading or emotional processes?" (2009, p. 8). This practice, I have argued, offers the relevant mental toolkit for individuals to draw attention to and raise awareness of hypermnesis within the reception experience. My practical focus group held at Southsea Sangha in October 2017 resulted in original comprehensive reception data that captures the communication of reception experiences from actual audience members of one of the hand-painted films.

The creation of this new epistemological and empirical approach to reception offers many wider implications for the arts. Firstly, it has consequences outside of merely a filmic setting. My qualitative methodology extends current performance theoretical insights into reception studies. The developing field of academia that is performance reception studies indicates

growing interest in communicating directly with audiences to develop audience reception. However, performance mostly consists of the presence of performers in the live reception space. This offers a more conventional and objective connection to lived experience through representation and recognition. Whilst performance art is more likely to remain isolated from traditional literary narrative (in comparison to film), it still involves recognisable features of lived experience that locates the performance within our material world. Again, the abstract element of the hand-painted works isolates this qualitative reception study from other similar projects. The lack of representation in Brakhage's films has provided a unique opportunity for reception research to consider the method of hypermnesis itself. I have strongly aligned my arguments with Petitmengin's helpful acknowledgement of the problem facing qualitative reception studies: audiences are not used to their reception experiences being thought of as significant. The impact of this has been limited awareness of hypermnesis for audience members and, as a direct consequence, limited understanding of how to achieve hypermnesis. My empirical reception methodology has offered an original solution to fill this gap. I have argued that mindfulness and meditation can demystify and increase awareness of the subjective reception process. As an increasingly popular practice and activity worldwide, I have identified mindfulness and meditation as a practical solution to developing hypermnesis in art. It offers an everyday practice linked directly to lived experience that millions of people are experiencing. This thesis has argued that, when applied to art reception, mindfulness and meditation offers a practical approach to phenomenology that helps to demystify art reception experiences.

Mindfulness and meditation-based reception studies offers a critical opportunity for the field of performance reception theory. It provides a new epistemological approach that centres on the act of hypermnesis by drawing attention to and developing skills in attention, awareness and reflexivity. This could be critical in educating audience members to the relevance of their reception experiences of art (emancipated viewers and co-creators of meaning) whilst also improving the recall of reception experience and the communication of hypermnesis. Future developments in this area would need to include further empirical reception studies using this mindfulness and meditation methodology. For this thesis, additional focus groups in mindfulness and meditation-based communities that explore the reception of the hand-painted films would be key. This would extend the existing reception data, offering more meaningful experiences of the hand-painted works and of the act of hypermnesis. Similar qualitative studies outside of Brakhage and across performance would establish mindfulness and meditation-based methods of reception more widely. They could offer new insights

into 'representational' performance art, emphasising a mindfulness experience as a process to move past simply the literary aspects or representational elements of an artwork. The overarching result of more empirical reception studies using mindfulness and meditation could nurture a greater awareness of the role of art appreciation. This would help to continue tackling and disrupting the traditional flow of communication from artist to audience. It would promote the role of the audience and the significance of the viewing experience to endorse this alternative consideration of art, away from the existing focus on the auteur.

Across the latter half of this thesis, I have argued that performance has moved away from an auteur focus more successfully than film. My interdisciplinary focus on performance, as a means to developing the reception process, has highlighted the medium of performance as pioneering in championing art appreciation. In contrast, reception in film remains an overlooked area of critical research. This is unsurprising as it once again relates to the objective communication and representation of conventional camera-made films, which does not encourage interest in such subjective audience perspectives. This thesis therefore highlights the innovative qualities of the hand-painted works as non-representational and non-objective films. They truly offer a unique case study within film, opening up significant critical pathways, through interdisciplinary methods, that both emphasise the weaknesses of existing filmic approaches whilst offering vital solutions that could break down the restrictive barriers that exist within the medium of film. However, in relation to performance, the medium of film requires a significant diversification of epistemic approaches to create a landscape that supports creative reception studies. Further reception and empirical reception studies within the medium of film would be highly significant in evidencing the need for a pioneering and alternative film culture. This, in turn, could increase the relevance of the film spectator and the viewing experience as a crucial subject of academic analysis. Empowering the role of the audience in this way highlights the rich possibilities of film reception as a future area of study. Reception studies in film could extend art appreciation across both alternative film and more mainstream film, offering greater inspiration for practical filmmaking and film scholarship. Once again, the overall consequence of this would be increased awareness of the possibilities of the film medium, something Brakhage would have fully supported.

### **Final conclusions**

I hope this thesis has succeeded in its overall aim of providing a new understanding of the hand-painted films. It has distanced the works from unhelpful elements of its existing critical

reception in order to offer a new identity, location and methodology that meets the accurate abstract and subjective nature of the films' visual narratives. It has concluded with primary evidence of audience engagement and experience of a hand-painted work, demonstrating the concrete possibilities for meaningful interaction with these abstract, under-explored and over-looked films. An original hope for this study was to demonstrate that these films could offer relevance to art discourse today. I would like to suggest this thesis has evidenced the collection's current relevance because it has led to vital critiques of the current art landscape. From empirical reception studies in performance to new advancements in interdisciplinary investigation, I have demonstrated crucial areas of current art scholarship that have demonstrated as a result of this historical, largely, twentieth century collection of films.

But this thesis has provided original approaches not just by identifying new developments but by acknowledging and addressing academic weaknesses that still exist and impact the current art climate. This thesis has heavily critiqued historical and existing approaches to film. It has offered an important, alternative consideration of the film medium from the perspective of over-looked and untraditional art. As a result, it has particularly highlighted weaknesses within the modernist avant-garde film movement of the twentieth century, which existed to explore alternative approaches to film in an effort to realise the true potential of the medium. This study has concluded that the avant-garde film movement failed in this aim because of the trends and labels that encouraged 'popular' strands of alternative film. I have demonstrated that the hand-painted films were too avant-garde for the avant-garde movement. They pushed the conventional assumptions and boundaries of film to such an extent that interdisciplinary investigation was required to consider the essence and entity of the hand-painted films. This thesis has similarly identified the lack of diversity and broadness within film scholarship, particularly in comparison to other media. It has suggested in multiple ways that this lack of diversity has held back potential practical progressions of film, resulting in lost opportunities to develop fresh, creative and alternative approaches to film. Through this example of the hand-painted films alone, I have identified potential expansion for film scholarship in relation to communication, abstraction and reception, that are absent of an appropriate level of critical thought. All of these areas offer vital possibilities for the visual narrative; extending the visual opportunities of film and film academia by extending attention outside of representation, objective communication and literary narrative. This thesis predicts that without such creative and fresh approaches, film art will be restricted by its conventional film expectations, regressing the possibilities and depth of film that filmmak-

ers such as Stan Brakhage worked so hard for. It would be highly appropriate if a consideration of Brakhage's discounted hand-painted films helped to encourage a modern review of the possibilities of film; extending the possibilities of what film can be and, therefore, bringing the medium full circle back to its historical avant-garde roots.

A crucial, overarching conclusion of this thesis is the importance of art appreciation. Exploring the act of reception has championed the voices and experiences of audience members, exploring how art is appreciated and, consequently, how it impacts our lived experience. It therefore seems fitting to conclude my thesis with my own personal and subjective conclusions. In my introduction, I suggested the focus of this thesis had been born out of my inability to communicate why Brakhage's hand-painted works resonated with me so strongly. I have suggested, through this thesis, that the works are meaningful to me because they offer a unique, reflective and phenomenological insight into my lived experience. But, in the end, I find that my conclusions open doors to a continuous journey of rich and diverse self-exploration and self-discovery. Through my reception experiences of Brakhage's second stage works, I can consider my own personal reflections and reflexive actions that are given to me directly through my active and participative viewing of the works. In this way, I can enable my experiences of art to result in personal and private knowledge that, cyclically, reflects on and impacts my own lived experience. It is in this way that art appreciation truly demonstrates the importance and relevance of art in society: through its continual impact on the lives and actions of its viewers.

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## Appendices

## Appendix One:

### List of Stan Brakhage's hand-painted films

#### *The pure hand-painted works*

Skein (1974)  
Nodes (1981)  
Hell Spit Flexion (1983) (later included in the *Dante Quartet* [1987])  
Loud Visual Noises (2 versions: 1986, 1987)  
Three Hand-Painted Films [Night Music, Rage Net, Glaze of Cathexis (1990)  
The Thatch of Night (1990)  
Untitled (For Marilyn) (1992)  
Boulder Blues and Pearls and... (1992)  
The Harrowing/ Tryst Haunt (1993)  
Blossom Gift/ Favor (1993)  
Study in Color and Black and White (1993)  
Three Homeric (Diana Holding Back the Night, The Rolling Sea and Love Again) (1993)  
Ephemeral Solidity (1993)  
Stellar (1993)  
Autumnal (1993)  
Naughts (1994)  
Chartres Series (1994)  
Elementary Phrases (1994) (\*with Phil Solomon)  
Black Ice (1994)  
Cannot Not Exist (1994)  
I Take These Truths (1994)  
Paranoia Corridor (1995)  
We Hold These (1995)  
I... (1995)  
Earthen Aerie (1995)  
Spring Cycle (1995)  
The 'b' Series (1995)  
In Consideration of Pompeii (1995)  
Preludes (...) 1-24 (1995-1996)

Shockingly Hot (1996)  
Blue Value (1996)  
Polite Madness (1996)  
The Fur of Home (1996)  
Beautiful Funerals (1996)  
Sexual Saga (1996)  
Concrescence (1996) (\*with Phil Solomon)  
Divertimento (1996)  
Last Hymn to the Night- Novalis (1997)  
The Birds of Paradise (1999)  
The Earthsong of the Cricket (1999)  
Cricket Requiem (1999)  
The Lion and the Zebra Make God's Raw Jewels (1999)  
Stately Mansions did Decree (1999)  
Coupling (1999)  
The Dark Tower (1999)  
Cloud Chamber (1999)  
The Jesus Trilogy and Coda (2000)  
Water for Maya (2000)  
Persian Series 1-5 (1999)  
Persian Series 6-12 (2000)  
Occam's Thread (2001)  
Persian Series 13-18 (2001)  
Rounds (2001)  
Micro-Garden (2001)  
Lovesong 1-6 (2001-2002)  
Dark Night of the Soul (2002)  
Ascension (2002)  
Resurrectus Est (2002)  
Song of the Mushroom (2002)  
Panels for the Walls of Heaven (2002)  
Seasons (2002): (\*By Phil Solomon and Stan Brakhage)

***The extended hand-painted works***

Thigh Line Lyre Triangular (1961)

The Horseman, The Woman and the Moth (1968)

Eyemyth [educational print] (1972)

The Wold-Shadow (1972)

Songs 1-7 (1980) (Song 4 is hand-painted)

Songs 8-14 (1980) (Song 14 is hand-painted)

Songs 16-22 (1980) (Song 16 and 21 are hand-painted)

Aftermath (1981)

Caswallon Trilogy (1986) (Fireloop is hand-painted)

The Loom (1986)

The Dante Quartet (1987) (Hell Spit Flexion is hand-painted)

Delicacies of Molten Horror Synapse (1991)

Interpolations 1-5 (1992) (Interpolations 2,3,4,5 are hand-painted)

From: First Hymn to the Night- Novalis (1994) (mixed with text)

Cannot Exist (1994)

The Lost Films (1995)

Through Wounded Eyes (1996) (\*with Joel Haertling)

Yggdrasill: Whose Roots Are Stars in the Human Mind (1997)

...(ellipses) Part 1 (1998) ('Reel' 1,2,4 and 5 are hand-painted)

Garden Path (2001) (\*with Mary Beth Reed)

Night Mulch & Very (2001) (mixed with text)

## Appendix Two:

### Themes of the hand-painted collection

The hand-painted collection can be explored in relation to five wider themes (see Chapter Two). This appendix categorises each of Brakhage's pure hand-painted works into its relevant theme in relation to the official film synopsis. All synopses, unless otherwise indicated, are written by Stan Brakhage and are taken from the Filmmakers Cooperative website (<http://film-makerscoop.com/>).

### Being in the physical world

**Blossom Gift/Favor (1993)** 16mm, color, 1/2 min

Genre: **Experimental**

Dedicated to Doug Edwards. All titles dominate linguistically; in that sense, any film would be better left unnamed. This little hand-painted work attempts to BE a visual "flowering," and as it is (as Film is) a continuity art, it would seek some visual corollary of the whole growth process (root, stem, leaves, blue sky and the bloody-gold growth of the meat/mind electricity of the filmmaker) -- but without mimic of either flower or thought process ... clear through to Film's clear "blossoming" in the passage of light.

**Harrowing, The/Tryst Haunt (1993)** 16mm, color, 5 min

Genre: **Experimental**

A hand-painted film which has been photographically step-printed to create varieties of tempo in mimic of sparking and molten rock. The recurrent centrality of certain painted forms, and the exploding magma-like flickering repetitions of all that surrounds the forms, suggests a harrowing process.

**Autumnal** (synopsis retrieved from <http://lux.org.uk/collection/works/autumnal> as missing from the Film Cooperative)

1993, 16mm, colour, 5 minutes

'This is a film composed of two elements: (1) simple hand-painted frames and brief strips of hand-painting, and (2) strips of blank colours, which appear as overall hues or colour tones filtering light itself rather than any pictured scenes. These two elements are interposed in editing so as to suggest the seasonal changes of tree-leaf (from greens to golds, reds and browns) and the sky (from varieties of warm to cold blues).' - S.B.

**Black Ice (1994)** 16mm, color, 5 min

Genre: **Experimental**

I lost sight due a blow on the head from slipping on black ice (leading to eye surgery, eventually); and now (because of artificially thinned blood) most steps I take outdoors all winter are made in

frightful awareness of black ice. These "meditations" have finally produced this hand-painted, step-printed film.

**Naughts (1994)** 16mm, color, 8 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

A series of five hand-painted, step-printed films, each of which is a textured, thus tangible, "nothing." A series of "nots," then, in pun, or knots of otherwise invisible energies. 1) The first begins with a semblance of fog clouds rising vertically, an upward lifting waterfall likeness which screens an ephemera of painted shapes that come, at end, to a rhythmic and formal hardness. 2) A progression of blue surreal shapes vanishing in forward movements. 3) A gathering of crystalline forms in primary colors emitting upward-moving flares of multicolored lights, all gradually suggesting an outward momentum. 4) An orange rock-beseeming wall of lights and upward flares suddenly frozen and fading. 5) A mixture of crystal and cellular shapes interacting like layers of a fire of decomposition, fogged, and finally like a palimpsest of melding illuminations.

**We Hold These (1994)** 16mm, color, 14 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

The 'Truths' of this film, which the title prompts, are slightly recognizable patterns of fish and animal biology, plant and flower shapes, and human anatomy which are interwoven with pastel cubes and other geometries- pastels as if 'hung' in a white light interwoven with straight and diagonally bent black lines, eventually clear architectural forms. The recognizable patterns are literally etched on black leader (primarily) and interspersed with very organic painted forms on white. There is often an intended sense of hair and mucous membrane amidst these forms and interwoven with the electric 'x-ray' sense of bones. The interplay between black-and-white sections and multi-colored section increases until there is some sense of merging the two toward the end.

**Earthen Aerie (1995)** 16mm, color, 2.5 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

This hand-painted, step-printed film begins with several seconds of blank white (interrupted by red and brief electric yellow) and then proceeds to multiply flecked earth and rock shapes and root-like forms which seem to suck horizontally inward and upward midst phosphorescent greens and blues increasingly flecked with light-yellows giving way to tree-top branch likenesses taking oblique shape against a phosphor sky.

**I... (1995)** 16mm, color, 40 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

"Whilst part of what we perceive comes through our senses from the object before us, another part (and it may be the larger part) always comes out of our own mind." - William James, The

**Principles of Psychology** This is a hand-painted double-step-printed film (i.e., each frame repeated once) which begins with some ephemeral forms and pale tones reminiscent of the "blues" of frothing ocean breakers, the dun "yellows" of the beach, and a complexity of fleeting inter-mixed various other colors and lines suggestive of a variety of vegetable and animal life such as might appear within a sea scape. The black lines gradually become hieroglyphic and then thicken (whenever they appear) across the length of the film - becoming more and more globular in their vertical inter-weave with increasingly brilliant and then darkened colors. Sometimes there is a beseeeming thicket of multiply colored shapes, sometimes a complexity more akin to animal cellular internal systems, and then, again, pale washes of tone remindful of the film's beginning. Finally the vertically moving globs and coils of glyph begin to thin, break up into broken lines interspersed with pointillistic imagery and horizontal washes of tone, punctuated by beseeeming rock-hard (usually centered) shapes like brilliantly colored, but battered, flecks of form. Then the "washes" are interrupted by spaces of pure white which come, finally, to a whitened end.

**Spring Cycle** (synopsis retrieved from <http://canyoncinema.com/catalog/film/?i=471> as missing from the Film Cooperative)

**Stan Brakhage | 1995 | 10 minutes | COLOR | SILENT**

**Rental Format(s):** 16mm film

This is a hand-painted, step-printed (with a variety of effects) film which begins with rock-like earth-toned shapes in darkness, followed by increasingly lighter pastel-colored mini-boulder forms to the right and left of the frame mimicking a whitish vertical tunneling (giving the illusion the viewer is moving upward, finally). Then there are garishly colored crystals (primarily green and red) seeming to "bloom" (as if minerals were crystallizing into flowers). Suddenly it is as if tubular phosphorescences (mostly purple, blue and green) are undulating in a dark field. Flashes of white and rhythmic blanks of pastel colors punctuate these transformations which soon become plant-like - beseeeming stalks of marsh grass under water, interrupted by whirling garish crystal flowers. Several times, in these passages, the film goes to these blanks of pastel tones. Finally the film ends on a series of these blank tones shifting among blues and blue-greens exploding into white.

(Note: I am the sole author of this film: Sam Bush of Western Cine Service, Denver, is a paid employee; and I've added the credit, at end, simply to fairly praise his workmanship.)

**Blue Value (1996)** 16mm, color, 2.5 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

This is a hand-painted step-printed film which begins with slow dissolves of what appear to be decaying leaves, crumpled browns and golds and oranges which assume qualities of earth and rock shot-through with flashes of crystalline prism colors and jagged scratch marks amidst glows of multiple coloration with increasing blues, varieties of tones of blue, from turquoise to near-purple -- these variations of tone (and shape, as well) gradually convey, given the comparatively few appearances of blue, a formal domination over all other tones (and attendant shapes) of the spectrum of the film.



**Fur of Home, The (1996)** 16mm, color, 4 min

Genre: Experimental

A hand-painted double-frame printed film which begins with textures reminiscent of a gray shag rug that is fretted by green and golden flashes-of-shape deepening into darker solid purples and even black solidities at brief intervals: this evolves into black hair-like lines which curl and trace circularities midst all earlier textures, forms and colors until, finally, tanned flesh and blood tones predominate. Suddenly a sweep of thin black verticals generate a recapitulation of the beginning which, then, ends on a glob of black.

**Birds of Paradise (1999)** 16mm, color, 1.5 min

Genre: Experimental

This is a hand-painted work which involves a variety of colors applied within gouged and scratched shapes which approximate both swift shifts of bird-shape (legs, beaks and feather-spreads especially) and the Bird of Paradise flower-form as well, the former tending to metamorphize into the latter across the course of the work.

**Shockingly Hot** (synopsis retrieved from <http://www.cfmdc.org/film/1952> as missing from the Film Cooperative)

by Stan Brakhage

U.S.A. / 3:00 / 1996 / silent / colour

This little hand-painted film was over-a-year in the making, and absolutely dependent upon a quality of "broad-stroke" in the painting which I think only children really capable of achieving, at least insofar as such stroke can approximate flame. These strokes/flames had, then, to be chopped back to the frame, in order to exist meaningfully on film. They had to be so timed as to epitomize the relentless of fire, so toned that fiery ice would be included in the aesthetic. (SB)

(Thanks to Anton and Vaughn Brakhage.)

**Earth Song of the Cricket, The (1999)** 16mm, color, 2.5 min

Genre: Experimental

This is a hand-painted work whose shapes are scratched on black leader filled with varieties of color: the resultant shapes tend to suggest insect-like movements, a rub of bent-lines together suggesting the electric hind legs of the cricket, whose movements engender (thru elaborate step-printing) quick pull-backs within frames of the film, so contrived as to create visual agitron lines within the zoom-like effect whose rhythm approximates a cricket's repetitive sound. This effect is echoed ephemerally later in the film as it nears its end of muted pull-down shapes and approximations of the earth-clod-likenesses and/or autumnal leaf-likenesses which begin the film.

**Lion and The Zebra Make God's Raw Jewels, The (1999)** 16mm, color, 6 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

This film is a hand-painted combination of shapes which suggest, as appropriately colored, jungle, open veldt, horizontals of grasses, shag-shape yellow of lion's mane, the black & white stripes of the zebra, the eyes, the teeth, the tearing open into raw blood-red meat and curve of bone. Nonetheless the film is in no sense an animation work but rather a collection of mostly un-nameable shapes which gather round this recognizable iconography and visually dominate the image which repeats its, thus, ephemeral chase-and-catch increasingly closer, finally obliterating all but the jewels, the multiple coloring, referred to in the title.

**Persian Series 1-5 (1999)** 16mm, color, 14 min

1) This hand-painted and elaborately step-printed work begins with a flourish of reds and yellows and purples in palpable fruit-like shapes interspersed by darkness, then becomes lit lightening-like by sharp multiply-colored twigs-of shape, all resolving into shapes of decay. 2) Multiple thrusts and then retractions of oranges, reds, blues, and the flickering, almost black, textural dissolves suggesting an amalgam approaching script. 3) Dark, fast-paced symmetry in mixed weave of tones moving from oranges & yellows to blue-greens, then retreating (dissolves of zooming away) to both rounded and soft-edged shapes shot with black. 4) Elaborate petal-like, stamen-and-stern-like, multicolored flowers rising in white space until the whole field is as if crushed by floral designs in madly-swift mixtures of every conceivable previous (in the PERSIAN SERIES) shape, evolving back to brilliant petals against what was at beginning of #4. 5) Dark blood red slow shifting tones (often embedded in dark) / (often shot-thru with parallel wave-like lines) composed of all previous shapes AND flowers as if trying, linearly, to evolve a glyph-script.

**Lovesong (2001)** 16mm, color, 7 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

LOVESONG is a hand-painted elaborately step-printed work which utilizes light transparencies in combination with light bounced directly off the surface of the individual film frames to establish and eventually enmesh two distinct entities of variable paint (more distinct than superimposition or bi-packing could achieve) - said entities taking on separate personae against which (and finally in conjunction with which) the glyphic representations of body-parts gradually entwining, separating and re-combining again and again, are interwoven with the expressively drawn sexual organs represented in dark outlines which often 'explode' into black sperm-marks surrounding multiply colored egg-likenesses.

**Lovesong 2 (2001)** 16mm, color, 7.5 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

LOVESONG 2 is a rapid recapitulation of the tactics of Lovesong, without the multiple rhythms of variable step-printing: it is a straight frame-to-frame 'run-through' of similar (albeit newly painted) images of love-making.

**Micro Garden (2001)** 16mm, color, silent, 4 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

Red and ephemeral blue and purple plant shapes half-curved against a tan ground, which begins to flash white cracks in dried mud patterns. A flush of watery blues (in this hand-painted step-printed film) brightens the plant-skein into a variety of greens mixed into all other colors—all darkening into smeared mud-blacks with microscopic beseeching black ‘splatters’ (where mud-like cracks used to be). The turquoise blues, red and tans resolve into a flare of red at end.

**Resurrectus Est (2002)** 16mm, color, silent, 9 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

Resurrectus Est is a hand painted film which suggests, from the first, a spread of fragments of plants and flowers, individual petals and bits of twig with multiple colors, with much green ‘leaf-iness’. This gives way to solid yellows and browns of, or suggesting, dried grass and earth (the decay, as it were, of the above mentioned fragments); but then again, and so spaced with clear light whites as to appear airy, wind-blown, some such, miniscule fragments of plant life, gradually enlarging to fill-the-frame. Amidst the many floral and earthen tones, there is a particular ethereal pale, almost phosphorescent, blue which so dominates the scenes of its appearance as to cause the darker earthen yellows to lighten into a mixture with the blue that suggest abstract Easter: these tones finally take over to such an extent that the flower-fragments can no longer be seen clearly as such. The whole work turns upon the dominance of yellow-and-blue to such an extent that, by end, the film can only be seen as ‘visual music’, completely (or predominantly) ‘abstract’ and as if composed of air itself (quite distinct, say, from ‘blue sky’ ‘yellow sun’ some such).

### The Creative and Sublime

**Stellar (1993)** 16mm, color, 2.5 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

This is a hand-painted film which has been photographically step-printed to achieve various effects of brief fades and fluidity-of-motion, and makes partial use of painted frames in repetition (for "close-up" of textures). The tone of the film is primarily dark blue, and the paint is composed (and rephotographed microscopically) to suggest galactic forms in a space of stars.

**Cloud Chamber (1999)** 16mm, color, 4.5 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

This hand-painted step-printed begins in a field of white light slightly bespeckled with ephemeral glazes of flecks of silver which gradually give way to pale suggestions of pastel colors. These take shape occasionally and flicker the forthcoming bits of solid colored and multiply formed abstract images, a few brief sequences-of-such inter-sperced with the cloud-suggestive silvered passages as at beginning, which eventually end the film. "When a hailstone forms, it makes a vertical voyage through a cloud; heavy updraft winds keep it aloft while downdrafts force it to fall. As the hailstone falls, its outer layer melts, shifts and then re-freezes in a complex formation when it rises. You can determine the number of trips a hailstone has made through a cloud by counting

the number of rings that have formed around its center. Eventually, the aggregate becomes too heavy and falls as a singular ball of ice." "In CLOUD CHAMBER, I felt that I saw what I might have seen, had I been at the nucleus of such a hailstone, collecting the colors of the cloud while making a circular voyage and finally falling at the saturation point - the heavy colors at the end of the film. The illustrations on the front are evidence of this collection of diverse colors on a hailstone, due to the obvious existence of such colors (in some form or another) in the clouds that generate them!" -- Courtney Hoskins

**Coupling (1999)** 16mm, color, 4 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

A hand-painted work prepared by my imagination of the sex act affecting internal organs of the human bodies.

### **Modes of seeing**

**Three Hand-Painted Films Nightmusic/Rage Net/Glaze of Cathexis (1990)** 16mm, color, 4 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

Nightmusic (1986) -- This little film (originally painted on IMAX) attempts to capture the beauty of sadness, as the eyes have it when closed in meditation on sorrow. "A work of hand-painted 'moving visual thinking'; colors and forms coursing, flowing, bursting, as if of fire and water -- of the earth, of the body, of the mind." Rage Net (1988) -- Much of what has been said about the above film could be repeated here, except that RAGE NET arises from meditation upon, rather than being trapped psychologically by, rage. Glaze of Cathexis (1990) -- This hand-painted work is easily the most minutely detailed ever given to me to do, for it traces (as best I'm able) the hypnagogic after-effect of psychological cathexis as designated by Freud in his first (and unfinished) book on the subject -- Toward a Scientific Psychology.

**Untitled (For Marilyn) (1992)** 16mm, color, 11 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

An untitled hand-painted film - a hypnagogic four-part thought process interwoven with scratched words in thanks to and praise of God.

**Boulder Blues and Pearls and ... (1992)** 16mm, color, 22 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

Music by Rick Corrigan. Peripheral envisionment of daily life as the mind has it -- i. e., a terrifying ecstasy of (hand-painted) synapting nerve ends back-firing from thought's grip of life.

**Preludes (...) 7 - 12 (1996)** 16mm, color, 20 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

This is a collection of six hand-painted sections interspersed by black leader ... which has been and will ONLY be shown in this form under this title. The first is what I call "plein-aire abstract" inasmuch as I am, while making the film, observing specific surroundings (primarily Vancouver Island, mostly in the city of Victoria) but am painting the reactions of my internal optic system affected by external scenes, only occasionally (and obliquely) identifiable. The ocean, the trees, the varieties of cityscape and landscape assert themselves as "pictures" (there is even a mirror image of a neon bar sign which persists for a few frames twice) but the images are essentially a wash and tangle of nervous feedback, sometimes influenced by, say, the colors of inlet waters, sometimes the wavemovements, but more ordinarily by the cellular shifts and shapes of the optic system receiving exterior imagery. The second is as removed as possible from any recognition of either exterior scene or interior feedback phenomena. It is, in its ineffability, as close to pure visual music as I can make it, more inspired by The Preludes of Bach or The Preludium of Buxtehude than anything of my surroundings when I was painting. The third, again, is "plein-aire abstraction" as defined above (painted in New York City) -- with, for example, even a correctly toned green impression of The Statue of Liberty -- and, then, impressions of Toronto with its architectural particularities appearing, midst hurrying people -- shapes (almost as if photographed at times). This segment is Double-Printed (i. e., two frames for every painted one). The fourth is also Double-Printed and, as such, is an extreme mixture of 1) darks shot thru with jewel-like bursts of color, and 2) very white bursts of light and fleeting colored forms. This is a purely interior vision and as unlike anything describable as I could possibly make it. Double-printing and plein-aire also is the fifth section: herein thick weaves of multicolored lines and dull-colored blobs play off against each other. The sixth, and last section is almost a bursting of mostly golden light forms as if heralding sunlight itself in their hurried (single-frame) display.

**Divertimento** ([1996](#)) 16mm, color, 2 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

This, painted in the hospital while recovering from cancer surgery in 1996, is -- it seems to me -- very related to De Kooning's Alzheimer's paintings. The mind, here, is seeking a "blank" and/or holding fast to tendrils of meaning which are stripped so bare as to be purely reflective of flesh tissue and irregular strands of cells.

### **The Representational**

**Nodes** ([1981](#)) 16mm, color, 2.5 min

Genre: [Experimental](#)

" (nodus knot, node--more at NET)... 4a: a point at which subsidiary parts originate or center... 5: a point, a line, or surface of a vibrating body that is free or relatively free from vibratory motion." In the tradition of SKEIN this hand-painted film is the equivalent of cathexis concepts given me by Sigmund Freud (in his Interpretation of Dreams) 30 years ago, finally realizing itself as vision. (Quote: Webster's 7th Coll.)

**Hell Spit Flexion (1983)** 16mm, color, 1 min

Genre: **Experimental**

My moving-visual response to William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven & Hell," this hand-painted film seems the most rhythmically exact of all my work: it was inspired by memories of an old man coughing in the night of a thing-walled ancient hotel... a triumph of rhythm thru to inspiration. Dedicated to Bill and Stella Pence.

**Loud Visual Noises (2 Versions) (1986)** 16mm, color, 2 min

Genre: **Experimental**

1st version is silent (24 fps). 2nd version has sound. This is a 'companion piece' to the similarly hand-painted FIRELOOP (of CASWALLON TRILOGY) and is dedicated to the film-maker Paul Lundahl who supplied the title which prompted the film.

**Thatch of Night, The (1990)** 16mm, color, 5 min

Genre: **Experimental**

As a poem might be said to contain the night through a weave of words, so have I in this film attempted such a container with warp and woof of emblematic visions. (Homage to Marie Menken's "Notebooks.")

**Three Homeric (1993)** 16mm, color, 6 min

Genre: **Experimental**

This film is composed of three sections created to accompany a piece of music (by Barbara Feldman) on a Homeric poem: 1) "Diana holds back the night ..." is represented by dark shapes suppressing (almost angularly interfering with) orange-golden effusions of paint and the reflective paint-shapes of early morning greens (as if silhouettes or arm and bodily profile were shading the light), 2) Homer's "... rolling sea ..." represented by hand-painted step-printed dissolves of blues in wave shapes, bubbles, and the soft browns and tender greens of seaweed, flotsam-jetsam, and 3) "Ah, love again, the light" represented by painted explosions of multiple hues and lines recurrently interrupted by the "blush" of soft suffusing reds

**Ephemeral Solidity (1993)** 16mm, color, 5 min

Genre: **Experimental**

This is one of the most elaborately edited of all the hand-painted films of late -- a Haydnesque complexity of thematic variations on a totally visual (i. e., un-musical) theme. This film is composed of 35mm hand-painted images reduced to 16mm film, single-frames, shots of two, three, four frames and, occasionally, slightly longer shots, all interspersed with a variety of calculated lengths of black leader which cause a flickering of abstract patterns in rhythm

darkness.

**Chartres Series (1994)** 16mm, color, 9 min

Genre: **Experimental**

A year and a half ago the filmmaker Nick Dorsky, hearing I was going to France, insisted I must see the Chartres Cathedral. I, who had studied picture books of its great stained-glass windows, sculpture and architecture for years, having also read Henry Adams' great book three times, willingly complied and had an experience of several hours (in the discreet company of French filmmaker Jean-Michele Bouhours) which surely transformed my aesthetics more than any other single experience. Then Marilyn's sister died; and I, who could not attend the funeral, sat down alone and began painting on film one day, this death in mind ... Chartres in mind. Eight months later the painting was completed on four little films which comprise a suite in homage to Chartres and dedicated to Wendy Jull. (My thanks to Sam Bush, of Western Cine, who collaborated with me on this, much as if I were a composer who handed him a painted score, so to speak, and a few instructions -- a medieval manuscript, one might say -- and he were the musician who played it.)

**In Consideration of Pompeii (1995)** 16mm, color, 4.5 min

Genre: **Experimental**

Since the age of 17/18, I've been haunted by the catastrophe of Pompeii -- beginning with photographs (sold as pornography in high school) of the mummified lovers caught in coitus and preserved by the volcanic ash, revived by many ghostly photographic books, but especially illuminated by Donald Sutherland's accounts and images from first hand experience of the ruins. Finally my homage in three parts: "The Flowers of Pompeii," "Ashen Snow," and "Angelus."

**Paranoia Corridor (1995)** 16mm, color, 2 min

Genre: **Experimental**

This film is an elaborately hand-painted step-printed work composed primarily of luminescent greens and blues in constantly shifting symmetrical shapes which suggest, rather than delineate, passage through a corridor. An increasingly menacing evolution of patterns is finally interrupted by a series of static shapes which almost appear to be symbols of resolution, ending on an almost-thigh-bone image.

**LAST HYMN TO THE NIGHT – NOVALIS** (synopsis retrieved from <https://mubi.com/films/last-hymn-to-the-night-novalis> as missing from the Film Cooperative)

Directed by [STAN BRAKHAGE](#)

United States, 1997 Short, 20

"I tried to imagine what the last hymn to Novalis's night had been if it was beyond language. (...) is the most elaborate hand painted film I've ever made".

**Dark Tower, The (1999)** 16mm, color, 2.5 min

Genre: **Experimental**

This hand-painted step-printed film begins with streaks of glare light and vibrantly colored forms apparently in the sky forasmuch as there appears, frame center, the tapered shape of a tower, a silhouette as it were against the backdrop of the flaring sky. As this shape of tower disappears, the conflagration of scratches and paints seems grounded and takes on the semblance of a battle of knights, their lances, horses, et al, often against a scattering of star-like flecks until finally the silhouette of the tower reappears as if much closer, certainly thicker and straight-sided. The film finishes as textures which tend to suggest an entrance into the textured walls of the tower, textures and stars intermingled with what may well seem chain-mail as well.

**Stately Mansions Did Decree (1999)** 16mm, color, 5.5 min

Genre: **Experimental**

This hand-painted, elaborately step-printed film begins with what appears to be torn fragments of thick parchment erupting upward, out of which emerges a series of landscapes, gardens, exteriors of mansions, castles and the like, then (as yellow predominates over vegetable greens, Sherwood greens and deep floral reds, blood reds) interior corridors and rooms, as if lit by chandeliers which somewhat echo visually the beginning of the film.

**Water for Maya (2000)** 16mm, color, 5 min

Genre: **Experimental**

WATER FOR MAYA is a hand-painted work which came into being during a film interview with Martina Kudlacek about Maya Deren. There was a sudden recognition of Maya's intrinsic love of water and thus of all Mayan liquidity in magic conjunction, reflection, etc.

**The Jesus Trilogy and Coda (2001)** 16mm, color, 20 min

Genre: **Experimental**

1) In Jesus Name presents an almost continues fluttering movement midst the complexity of multiple small shapes in mostly autumnal colors, like unto a wind moving through fall leaves. Embedded in this skein (almost as if branches of this scene) are the dark lines ephemerally (almost invisibly) composing the conventional face of Christ. 2) The Baby Jesus begins with pearl-pinks and gold-flecked shapes midst 'garden greens.' It proceeds to contrasting desert scenery- slashes of sand-yellow under black 'sky', with ephemeral suggestions of animal locomotion. Then there's some sense of darkened interior, the colors of straw and wood, slight furtive hints of beast features, hooded 'faces' and swaddling folds. Rolling hills, and a starred 'night sky' with flecks of herded white, then gathering of colors as of collected people shapes. After intervening black, the beseeching rocky side of a hill increasingly flecked with blood red. The desert-likeness comes again with, again, animal locomotion. Mills, mottles while, like snow, give way finally to peacefully wood-toned enclosures. 3) Jesus Wept utilizes a variety of shapes and colors so fretted and interlocked with darkness as to create the sense of glamorous terror within which palpable



shapes of 'tears' appear and weave a counterbalance of sorrowful calm. Because these 'tears' are as if in bas-relief (side and front lit) textured and altogether of such a visual solidity, they form and aesthetic bulwark against the (back lit) fret forms. 4) Coda: Christ on a Cross contains the most easily nameable of all the shapes in this trilogy: it is, thus an aesthetic 'summing up' with full emphasis upon the crucifixion which is visible again and again as a mass of twisting lines and tortured forms, flecked with vermillion blood likeness. The intervening scenes are stark, dark dramatics, reactive to the recurring cross. The conventional face of Jesus is occasionally visible as lines that are consonant with the, at time, almost renaissance draftsmanship of these scenes. The attempt is to sum-up Death as iconic triumph in relation to the three previous films.

**Rounds (2001)** 16mm, color, 11 min

Genre: **Experimental**

This film is a hand painted film composed of a series of film loops printed in such a fashion (bi-packed and combined with careful irregularity) that while there is a feeling of repetitive familiarity, no actual example of specific repetition is easily seeable. The colored abstract forms seem as if figures at a carnival and/or sometimes as if 'on stage': thus their actions are, then, particularly theatrical. When they most appear recognizable as the shapes of paint, which they are, these events seem the dramatics of the Abstract Expressionist movement -- i. e. dramatically gestural. The film begins with blues and reds, played off against clear white spaces or stark blacks. Gradually they balance of the four key tones midst darks and lights, eventually overwhelmed by a film-flare of yellows at end.

**Occam's Thread (2001)** 16mm, color, 7.5 min

Genre: **Experimental**

Occam's Thread is a 16mm silent motion picture, copyright 2001, by Stan Brakhage. This is a hand painted, step printed work which views Occam's economical vision of life (The Razor's Edge') as something more thread-like: a staggered black line, growing steadily more solid, albeit often tangled trails vertically across the film surface, insinuating itself (it's life as it were) through a series of various paint shapes, some of which seem as if about to destroy it, bury it in black patches or cut into it: finally the line as if severed in glare of white leader, ending in multicolored paint patch.

**Dark Night of the Soul** (synopsis retrieved from <http://canyoncinema.com/catalog/film/?i=3746> as missing from the Film Cooperative)

Stan Brakhage | 2002 | 3.5 minutes | COLOR | SILENT

Rental Format(s): 16mm film

This hand-painted work presents the semblance of a dark brown wall, ripped open and pocked with yellowed visions of rooms and other interiors, gradually (and always occasionally) interspersed with multiply colored holes, revealing exteriors beyond the shifting facades of the "wall". The openings into and through the wall become larger, and then become smaller again (so small

as to seem semblances of stars at times). Finally the enlargements take over the scene and eventually demolish all sense of "wall". This film is very inspired by the paintings of Gunther Forg, and with respect to St. John of the Cross, is a hand painted envisionment of holy depression.

**Seasons...** (description retrieved from <https://lightcone.org/en/film-4260-seasons> as synopsis is missing from the Film Cooperative)

by **Phil SOLOMON**

*2002 / 16mm / color / silent / 15 / 18' 00*

Brakhage's frame-by-frame hand carvings and etchings directly into the film emulsion, sometimes photographically combined with paint, are illuminated by Solomon's optical printing; this footage was then edited by Solomon into a four part 'seasonal cycle'. This film can be considered to be part of a larger, 'umbrella' work by Brakhage entitled «...». Seasons... is inspired by the colors and textures found in the woodcuts of Hokusai and Hiroshige, and the playful sense of forms dancing in space from the film works of Robert Breer and Len Lye.

### **The Abstract**

**Skein (1974)** 16mm, color, 4 min

Genre: **Experimental**

'A loosely coiled length of yarn (story) ... wound on a reel' -- my parenthesis! This is a painted film (inspired by unpainted pictures): 'skins' of paint hung in a weave of light.

**Study in Color and Black and White (1993)** 16mm, color, 2.5 min

Genre: **Experimental**

The title is almost the whole of any possible description of this hand-painted and photographically step-printed film which exhibits variably shaped small areas of color (in a dark field) which explode into full frames of textured color interwoven with white scratch patterns that create a considerable sense of interior depth and three-dimensional movement.

**Cannot Not Exist (1994)** 16mm, color, 10 min

Genre: **Experimental**

In this non-orange negative of a hand-painted film, a series of luminously pastel shapes -- often patches of color against a stark white background -- are interspersed with nearly black intermittent smudges punctuating white. These visual themes develop gradually into a series of multi-colored vertical lines which weave contrapunctally in relation to the flickering (single-frame) paint shapes. Twice, a solid (as if photographed) shape is seen receding from the amalgam of paint. Masses of tiny dots and "curlicue" shapes sometimes interrupt the thematic progression from irregular paint-shape flickerings to fluidity of vertical lines: this theme eventually resolves itself through the intervention of globular shapes (most notably, brilliant orange-yellow "globs")

which spread themselves over several frames and prompt the eventual amalgamation of all themes.

**I Take These Truths (1994)** 16mm, color, 35 min

Genre: **Experimental**

This film is entirely hand-painted and is composed of such an evolution of variably colored shapes that their inter-action with each other should constitute a purely visual "self-evident" (as prompted by the title): everything beyond the title is as far removed from language as I could possibly make it; and thus it is, to me, practically impossible to describe. Each frame is printed twice, so that its effective speed (at 24 fps) is 12 frames per second. A variety of organic and crystalline painted shapes (painted on clear leader, thus as if brilliantly back-lit in a blazing space of light) are interspersed with very dark (black leader) passages as if etched with scratches of light and stained radiances: the juxtaposition of these two contrasting qualities of painted and scraped film are "interwoven," sometimes with vine, or vein-like irregular lines in black or alternatively, scratch-etched white. There are also some straight, multi-colored, bars which move, diagonally from one side of the film frame to the other. All these "themes" finally give way to clear thick gelatinous effects which resolve themselves in a long passage of beseeemingly-struggling hieroglyphic white shapes in a black field, ending on a brief spate of variable coloration.

**Elementary Phrases** (description retrieved from <https://lightcone.org/en/film-219-elementary-phrases> as synopsis is missing from the Film Co-Op)

by **Stan BRAKHAGE & Phil SOLOMON**

1994 / 16mm / color / silent / 1S / 35' 00

This is a hand-painted and elaborately step-printed collaboration between the film makers Stan Brakhage and Phil Solomon.

**Small b Series, The (1995)** 16mm, color, 20 min

Genre: **Experimental**

This consists of five titled "sections" (Brakhage's word) mounted on one reel: Retrospect: The Passover; Blue Black: Introspection; Blood Drama; I Am Afraid: And This Is My Fear; Sorrowing.- Fred Camper

**Beautiful Funerals (1996)** 16mm, color, 20 min

Genre: **Experimental**

BEAUTIFUL FUNERALS is a hand-painted double-step-printed film composed of 1) dense blackness variously punctuated by brilliantly colored jewel/flower-like shapes AND 2) interruptive white sections which are fuzzily dotted with blurred whites and criss-crossed by black "brushstrokes" and hard-edge straight black and white lines. Finally there is a brilliant pinkish

flare veined with curled blue lines which engenders a resolution between these (above described) alternating modes -- colors in the straight-line sections, lines among the artifice of "flowers," a kind of dark lattice-form which knits the two modes, gray and colored "clouds" which correlate them. (Note: the credit to Sam Bush, Western Cine, is simply an homage to his creative craftsmanship. He is a paid employee of Western Cine, Denver, Colorado, who was hired for this job: he is in no sense a collaborator on this work.)

**Sexual Saga** (synopsis retrieved from <http://canyoncinema.com/catalog/film/?i=448> as missing from the Film Cooperative)

**Stan Brakhage** | 1996 | 3 minutes | COLOR | SILENT

**Rental Format(s):** 16mm film

This hand-painted step-printed film begins with "explosions" of white, yellow, orange (deepening into reds), vermillion, and darker red flame shapes. Then there are anatomical beseeching solid yellows against flickering reds. Multiple dissolves of all previous forms and flickering shapes interspersed with blacks and replaced by "dolly in" movements (of the same) interspersed with white, then increasingly with lengthening blacks which finally gives way to a single vermillion/purple burst of flowery form.

**CONCRESCENCE** (description retrieved from <https://mubi.com/films/concrescence> as synopsis is missing from the Film Cooperative)

Directed by [PHIL SOLOMON](#), [STAN BRAKHAGE](#)

United States, 1996

Avant-Garde, Short

This is a hand-painted step-printed collaboration between Phil Solomon and Stan Brakhage.

**Polite Madness (1966)** 16mm, color, 2.5 min (incorrect date on website, should be 1996)

Genre: **Experimental**

A hand-painted elaborately step-printed film which begins in blues and greens with golden geographic-beseeching continents which evolve into symmetricals and dark passages (including a whirling tunnel) whitening to create many bas-relief (photographic soarization) fragments of these previous forms that then flicker vibrantly in a field of ever whitening light.

**Preludes (...) 1 - 6 (1996)** 16mm, color, 12 min

Genre: **Experimental**

PRELUDES 1-6 is comprised of six hand-painted and double-frame printed sections of 16mm film: 1) Turquoise and maroon-toned thin lines of paint are inter-spersed with variously toned circular "water-marks" of blotched paint giving-way to multi-colored brush strokes and finally fulsomely darkened and thickened brush-strokes which then thin to something akin to the beginning. 2)

Interplay of toned rectangular shapes, vertical and horizontal and diagonal lines in juxtaposition with hardened darker shapes which gradually shift tone and lighten until ending on thin blues. 3) Many white interruptive frames and absolutely straight-edged multi-colored lines amidst "clouds" of color, finally thickened into blobs with lengthy white (clear leader) spacing between them. 4) Much depth of multi-colored thickened shapes which appear to be super-imposed upon each other, semi-transparent in their "weave" with each other which is increasingly interrupted by ragged-edged blobs and smears of color. 5) This section is very similar to #4 except that it is composed of extremely thin-lined colors and sharply delineated shapes which are constantly interrupted by "cloud"-like forms. 6) Interplay of mostly horizontal linears inter-woven with "watermark" forms in a wide variety of tones which gradually tend to dissolve into blues at end.

**Cricket Requiem (1999)** 16mm, color, 3 min

Genre: **Experimental**

CRICKET REQUIEM is a hand-painted and elaborately step-printed film which juxtaposes bent, sometimes saw-tooth, scratch shapes multiply colored in pastels on a white field juxtaposed with emerging, and sometimes retreating, bi-pack imagery of the faintest imaginable lines (solarized lines) etched in brown-black. This interplay continues until the latter imagery begins to dominate with increasing recurrence. Then suddenly there's a vibrant mix of thick black lines (which is "echoed" once again near end of film) that alters the increasingly colored bent lines and their thin-stringy accompaniment, with rhythms which suggest a stately and emphatic end.

**Persians 6-12 (2000)** 16mm, color, silent 18 min

Persian Series 10 twigs of color in space, and pure white ghosts of them in the background interspersed with dark amalgams of these and conglomerate forms. The resolve of these themes is a combination of amalgams and ghosts at one in interplay, and then dark slashed spaces with webs of white, webbed spaces on white and finally solarization of colored forms- midst which the frame-line rises from bottom and drifts a few seconds visible, creating an insubstantiality of the frame of these images. Persian Series 11 begins with a window of yellow adrift in the full frame of multicolored paint shapes. Alternating black-space/ white-space exhibits as a back-drop for slashes and curves of color- reds and blues shifting to red-blue-green, then yellow, etc. slashes in black. Persian Series 12 hot by-play of reds-greens-yellows in black, blurred, finally as the color shapes are shifted violently from side to side, finally ending of a sharp entanglement of multicolored twig like and/or stem life forms.

(Synopsis from the film-makers cooperative starts from Persian 10).

**Persian Series 13-18 (2001)** 16mm, color, silent, 11 min

Genre: **Experimental**

#13 is a series of extremely dark images, mostly in purples, greens and fiery red-orange-yellows, shifting one to another in displays greens and fiery red-orange-yellows, shifting one to another

in displays of textured shapes which suggest a thick tangle weave of threads. #14 is composed of muted color-shapes shifting variably in juxtaposition and with high-contrast black & white abstract patterns. #15 is a rapid shift of patterns black & white playing off against muted coils of color. #16 is an even MORE exaggerated contrast of color and black-&-white patterning. #17 is a series of quite distinct globules of paint brilliantly colored and shifting as if vertically in the plane (as different from the more horizontally orientated previous parts)/ #18 is almost a calligraphic in its overlays of dark (occasionally colored) glyphs backed by brilliant color motifs.

**Panels for the Walls of Heaven (2002)** 16mm, color, 35 min

Genre: **Experimental**

"This film is an entirely hand-painted film composed of a combination of highly complex step-printed super-impositions of hand-painting (at variable speeds), and raw and highly textured strips of hand-painted original film run at speed (24 distinct frames every second). It can be considered the fourth part of what had been called the "Vancouver Island Trilogy" (A CHILD'S GARDEN and THE SERIOUS SEA, THE MAMMALS OF VICTORIA, and THE GOD OF DAY HAD GONE DOWN UPON HIM), making the entire work now the "Vancouver Island Quartet." "Purple flashes are followed by a curtain of purple and blues, first seemingly static and then in motion. Close-ups of textures of paint evolve into flashes of jewel-like red, then more cascading blues and purples and white - 'falling,' seemingly, down from the top of the screen, at other times multi-directional bursts of rolling colors. Red, blue and yellow course through in an up-down motion, then blues and yellows enter from left and right in a complex medley of not solidly formed, but very vibrant pulsations of color, at times only slightly hinting at a solidity of "wallness" upon which the paint might exist. But it is a "wall" suffused with light. Suggestions of fire and water, textures of paint on wall, sparkling jewels, and chunks of blue-white ice arise, as the textures of paint at times become a riotous rainbow of tumbling hues flowing in a river of light, creating the paradoxical experience of a fully substantial insubstantiality "The film clearly echoes back to earlier Brakhage films, including "A Child's Garden" and the "seriousness" of the sea, as well as hand-painted works such as SPRING CYCLE and STELLAR. The image holds briefly on a vision of depth of black with jewel-colored edges, followed by a wash of yellow, more 'panels' of color, then sheets of ice-like blues joined by red and finally turning to dark green. There is a seeming movement into the details of the paint itself. Curtains of black web-like lines explode once again into tumbling yellows and mauves, slowing, then becoming faster again, going into a step-like movement, frame to frame, of views of walls that are not walls, showing an increasing tactility, with occasional apparent "holes," and then resuming a multi-directional flow, and moving on into a recapitulation of some earlier forms: greens, reds, blues, red/black, greens and yellows, with sparkling blacks and swatches of red, loosening up once again on a whiter ground, with forms reminiscent of swimming spermatazoa and ending finally on a cumulative repetition of earlier visual themes."-Mari-lyn Brakhage

**Ascension** (description retrieved from <https://www.25fps.hr/en/film/ascension> as synopsis is missing from the Film Cooperative)

Stan Brakhage US, 2002, 2', 16 MM

*Ascension*, one of several completed when he already knew he might be dying, its often bright colors giving the feeling of momentary apparitions. (Fred Camper)

**Song of the Mushroom** (description retrieved from <https://lightcone.org/en/film-9296-song-of-the-mushroom> as synopsis is missing from the Film Cooperative)

by **Stan BRAKHAGE & Joel HAERTLING**

*2002 / 16mm / color / silent / 1S / 2' 00*

Song of the Mushroom (2002), completed in December 2002, is a collaboration between filmmakers Joel Haertling and Stan Brakhage. With interest in mycology, Haertling made mushroom spore prints directly onto clear 16mm film. A 7.25 second loop was passed from Haertling to Brakhage who added hand painting. This loop was then step-processed utilizing a variety of lighting aspects. Brakhage did the final edit. This was one of the very last films Brakhage made before he left Boulder in January 2003. He died in Canada in March 2003.

## Appendix Three:

### Promotion of the focus group in Southsea Sangha e-newsletter

The following information was emailed out to members of the Southsea Sangha (by the Sangha team) on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2017.



#### ★ MEDITATION & RESEARCH ★



On Sunday 22nd October, Southsea Sangha will be hosting an informal focus-group exploring the relationship between meditation and art.

Vikki Smith, PhD student at the University of Portsmouth, is an active member of our sangha.

Vikki will be screening a short 5 minute film and leading a discussion afterwards to explore this relationship, which will be included within her thesis.



The focus-group will take place at the Sangha straight after the weekly session at 7pm, and will last no longer than 40 minutes.

For more information, or to sign up, please contact Vikki on [vikki.smith@btinternet.com](mailto:vikki.smith@btinternet.com).



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## Appendix Four:

### Focus group pre-questionnaire analysis

The following data represents the pre-questionnaire answers of the ten participants that took place in the focus group at Southsea Sangha in October 2017.

#### 1. Please tick the appropriate age bracket:

Under 18		
18-35	IIII	(4)
36-50	IIIII	(5)
51-75	I	(1)
Over 75		

#### 2. Gender

Male	IIIII	(5)
Female	IIIII	(5)

#### 3. Approximately how long have you been meditating for:

2 years  
6 weeks  
2 months  
One year  
16 months  
2 years  
4 years  
9 years  
10 years  
13 years

#### 4. Please briefly describe your meditation experience:

*At home alone, depending on stress levels, usually around once a week. Also do yoga.*

*Mainly just Southsea Sangha, few times at home, no retreats, no other activities*  
*Every week at Southsea Sangha*  
*Practice at home and at Southsea Sangha, have attended some day long retreats.*  
*At home, bus, train and yoga*  
*I try to practice daily or at least 3-4 times a week. I have attended day-long but not week-long retreats.*  
*I help out at a local sangha.*  
*I do formal meditation twice a day (and also during my daily basic), be present as often as I can.*  
*I went to a weekend meditation retreat once and to a day meditation once too.*  
*Been on a two 7 day silent retreats and several shorter 2-4 day silent retreats. I have done an MBSR and MBCT and teach mindfulness 8 week courses.*  
*Southsea Sangha- past 8 months. General mindfulness practice past 5 years. Mindfulness during exercise, reading related texts.*  
*Attended 24 retreats over 13 years. Vipassana meditation, daily, practice yoga but not regularly.*

**5. Have you heard of Stan Brakhage?**

Yes	I	(1)
No		(9)

**6. If yes, what works?**

Only Black Ice

## Appendix Five:

### Focus group questions

The questions below were used by myself (as the researcher) to lead the focus group at Southsea Sangha in October 2017.

- 1) Initial discussion to be led by participants' key thoughts and opinions etc.

*Questions to ask if not covered by the participants' independent thoughts:*

- 2) Were/ are you aware of any thoughts/ feelings/ bodily sensations you experienced throughout the screening?
- 3) How aware were you of your own body/ presence whilst viewing the work? How does this compare to other experiences of art you have had (i.e. with music, film, painting, sculpture etc.)
- 4) Have you experienced anything like this before or what did it make you think of?
- 5) Do you think your experience of meditation had any impact on your experience of the film?
- 6) How would you describe this artwork to someone else?
- 7) Do you think this venue impacted the experience you had? Do you think this would have been different in a cinema or theatre?
- 8) Do you think this focus-group conversation has impacted your reflection on your experience? If so, in what way?
- 9) How did the absence of 'story' impact your experience?
- 10) How did it feel discussing your experience of the artwork in this way? Why?
- 11) How did this experience relate to your experience of meditation?

## Appendix Six:

### Focus group transcript

- VS: I have got some specific questions I wanted to ask you, but first of all, I wondered if there were any comments or questions anyone wanted to talk or ask the group.
- A: I have a question, where does the title come from? Persian 1,2 and 3...
- VS: The filmmaker, later on his life, started to give titles to his films without an explanation of the meaning behind it. He didn't want to have as much dictation over the experience. This particular film he gave very little explanation as to why that was the title. But they are part of a wider series of films, up to 18.
- B: It was all quite confusing!
- (Lots of murmurs, agreement, laughter)*
- B: And slightly unsettling.
- C: You said later on his life? Is he dead now?
- VS: He is yes, he died in the early noughties. These works were created between the 1980s and the noughties, so for him they were in the later part of his career. He had originally created works using a camera so this was quite different from his earlier works.
- D: Yeah it was almost kind of aggressive in points, I agree with what you said earlier on about the confusing, because it's like, it's so dynamic and then the dynamisms seems to change direction, it comes towards you and then it speeds up and... yeah.. I don't know...
- E: You could tell that, it was like sometimes you were travelling into it, at one point you were coming into it and then travelling out of it-
- D: Yeah! And then it was coming at you at points.
- E: And then, I think it was Persian 3 it was like symmetrical
- F: It was like [...]
- B: Yeah that's what it reminded me of as well.
- E: And then the line of symmetry sort of shifted off to the side...
- VS: [To 'F'] Sorry, it reminded you of?
- F: The Rorschach test... But I think it was too... too fast for me to kind of... think of what I could see there, to be honest.
- A: Persian 1 I actually really liked it, with the gaps, with the black... To me it just reminded me a lot of my practice... 2 and 3 it was just kind of like, what the fuck...

*(Group laughter)*

A: The first one, I was kind of, it just, it really resonated with me actually, just kind of the business of the mind and then the breaks in that, and the intonation throughout, I really liked that one.

VS: So it reminded you of a mental state?

A: Yeah definitely in my earlier days and then with the black outs of stepping out of that and then coming back again and then step... I liked the first one.

G: I think the first one was the most gripping as well, because you didn't know when it was going to come back and go...

H: I didn't like the first one. I found it really, I was really adverse to it, the second one I liked. It reminded me of being on acid...

*(Laughter)*

H: It was really quite pleasant! And then I think there were points in it where I was like, oh no this is reminding me of the first one again.

VS: Do you know what it was about the first one you didn't like? Anything specific?

H: It just seemed really severe, whereas the second one seemed much more flowy and fluid.

VS: Do you think that was to do with the colours or the pace?

H: Maybe... yeah both. And it seemed wider and more kind of...uh... open, where the first one seemed a bit more kind of like [rrrrrrr] fast and closed... and dark.

I: For me it was, it was different. The first part I felt like I was more calm, the second and the third my heart was beating so fast- I was feeling that, I was like... OK... and as you say it was like catching me and then leaving me and... I don't know why but the first part it reminds of, sometimes, when I'm deeply, deeply meditating, I can see some things but not colour. And to be honest, those kind of things, it reminded me of that, but with colours. Sorry, maybe it's silly, but when I'm deeply meditating and I close [points to eyes], I can see some feeder coming in and out... the first bit, I see that, I can feel that. But the second and the third I was like woaah, not for me. I don't know if it was because, maybe I related that because we are doing meditation or, I don't know... maybe not... it was just a feeling I have.

F: Maybe I was imagining it, but in the first one, because it was slower, were there some representational images also mixed in between the abstract one?

VS: This one the images are purely hand-painted

F: Because it was more geometric at times, almost like architectural images in between... which made it a bit more dramatic, I don't know...

VS: For everyone, linking it to your meditational practice, were there any particular thoughts or feelings that you were aware of whilst the screening was taking place?

- B: Personally, I was surprised you said the blackouts were the most calming bit for you because that was pretty stressful for me. I think...um...possibly because I worked a lot in technology and presentations, as soon as I see something go out I'm not sure if it's not working or if something's broken, I got a jolt every time something blacked out.
- H: The first time I noticed the desire to look away and I kind of, consciously continued to pay attention and just noticed the urge to want to avoid it.
- VS: Was that during the blackouts or throughout?
- H: No, just the first one. At the very start, it was much more obvious, at the very start that desire to want to look away. But as it went on it kind of lessened and I just looked at it... thinking... I don't like this
- (Group laughter)*
- H: Or feeling I don't like this, I don't know... is it a thought or a feeling? Probably both.
- A: I didn't really dislike any of them but I noticed in the second one there was a bit of tension in the back of my throat.... Oddly, my breathing by the second one had really kind of calmed down but I noticed that... the back of my throat was quite tense which, I didn't really understand why but I noticed that.
- VS: And did you notice that at the time or-
- A: Oh yeah definitely at the time, so I switched to just... breathing through my nose and, just... I just tried to... enjoy the imagery more and that seemed to go, maybe I was just feeling a bit anxious around the speed of it, I don't know. Nothing really stood out as to why.
- I: It [...]. To me it was like, like I said about the heart beating, it was faster in the second and the third and I realised I had to breathe-
- (Group laughter)*
- I: - Like [breathes deeply] like phew ok, I'm here, it's ok. And to be honest, I was thinking what that guy took, what kind of drug or something like... I was [...] that was the only thing I was thinking like 'what is this'? And I need to, [breathes again] ok, I am here, that's it.
- VS: Any awareness of things happening in your body or mind/ thoughts, how does this relate to any other experiences of art you've had?
- I: For me, it was important, not like art, I don't know what is the name of that psychologist that he uses like paintings to show you like, 'what do you see here?' That was for me, like 'what should I see here?' It's not anything related with art but it was like what should I see? And I see that figure once, I think, like the kind of psychologist and- I'm not a psychologist, I don't know the name, I'm sorry- it was like, maybe I should see *[inaudible]* but that was the only thing, I don't think I can relate it to anything else.

- E: I guess, for me, I just... compare it to film and I guess, just frustration- feelings of frustration- the way in the first film...when it goes to black that there was no rhythm, there was no rhythm to that, to what seemed like an edit, I found that very jarring. And then, yeah, just the whole non-narrative aspect of it I just... yeah I guess I found frustrating a bit? Yeah.
- VS: It felt quite different to your other film experiences?
- E: Yeah, yeah absolutely. I think when something it is a film I come to it with preconceptions about narrative whereas obviously that was much more kind of like 'art', and that thing in the end where he said he was almost like... a visual composer kind of thing, and that kind of aspect of it was like... ok right, yeah... so yeah I guess... I just can't help but bring how I feel about film into it and then... [rrrr] it's just very jarring.
- A: I noticed I really wanted music.
- E: Yeah, it felt like it should *be* to music.
- A: I really, really wanted music and I was getting a bit pissed of that there wasn't music at some points. Because it reminded me of aspects of, 'E's' a bit more of a film boff than me, but I went to London and saw the composer who scored *Requiem for a Dream*, and he composed music to visual stuff and started off with *Requiem for a Dream* but then kind of did a load of other stuff and that was kind of, in a way, that reminded me of that, but then there was music there, and that's when I was kind of wishing that there was music with this. In terms of- I've never seen anything like that, so it's hard to relate it to any other creative medium that I've been exposed to, but.. a bit like 'H' really, it reminded me, took me, a little bit back to my drug days to be honest.
- H: It's all I keep thinking, I didn't want to keep saying and bang on about it but...
- [Group laughing]
- H: It's *just* like doing acid, that second one, is like doing glue... I'm not going to like expose myself here, but sniffing glue just makes you kind of like go into this weird kind of.... but it's not art, it's just all in your own mind.
- G: It's like when you close your eyes when you're on acid, you see loads of flashing images.
- H: Yeah, yeah.
- G: But I think the second one reminded me of music, like some of the modern composers. But the first one actually I did find some rhythm in that one
- E: Yeah?
- G: -sort of... it was like poetry almost, like stops and... yeah I did find some rhythm.
- I: Speaking about the music, what was the last sentence that said thank you to... whatever, the colour of the- what was the sentence?

- VS: It was that the film should be seen as a visual composition, Brakhage was the composer alongside the other person he created it with, which is all to do with the process of how it was made, which is very different from a lot of modern film. It goes back to using quite a lot of equipment that's not readily available any more.
- I: It said something about painted music but there wasn't any music! How do you say about the colourful music, ok I was confused, maybe it was the language [barrier].
- VS: No, it's not. I won't say any more on that now but I'll tell you a bit more about it at the end, that is very much related to the artist.
- E: Was it like a synaesthetic thing, was that what it was trying to do?
- VS: Not specifically, no.
- E: Ok.
- C: I found looking at it for six minutes, the time actually went quite fast. If you were to get me in front of my favourite painting for six minutes my mind would have probably wondered a lot more. But I found my mind was just in that. Might have some agitation if it went on for half an hour to be frank, but uh I thought it did grab your attention, keep you in the moment, that's what I'm saying.
- A: It was hard to get distracted wasn't it? You know, you'd have emotional, physical responses to it. I still wasn't going off with them, they were just kind of there and it captivated me.
- (C murmurs agreement throughout A's comment)*
- B: I think I was just constantly trying to interpret the images that were coming up, it's like, no I don't recognise anything here.
- (Murmurs of assent, giggles, "It's true")*
- F: I found it difficult to engage because it was too fast. And I think it was... quite different to my temperament. Where I like to focus and observe something for longer and... yeah, I can engage with something quieter/ slower.
- VS: Following those comments, generally these films aren't understood to have a representational narrative in the same way as, for example, a Hollywood film. Was that something that impacted your experience?
- H: What does that mean? Representational narrative?
- VS: Sorry, a literary narrative with a conventional story.
- H: Ok, right.
- C: For six minutes, I didn't mind but if I went to an art gallery for a couple of hours I could get quite cheesed off I think. That's what you're saying? In comparison to watching a film for two hours?
- VS: Well, I suppose that's because Hollywood films are that long, there is that comparison.



- A: I would have struggled to go to a gallery and everything be like that. I was in a museum in Berlin this year and the initial part of the museum was like temporary exhibitions and there was stuff like that and I was immediately irritated. But then it was only like less than a quarter of the museum so I could kind of do my own thing and go and look at other stuff. I think if there was a whole- I think I would struggle for more than six minutes. I could probably get to ten minutes of that ...
- VS: But that particular screening, for those six minutes-
- A: Yeah it was ok.
- B: I think because I knew that there was no narrative, I was looking to interpret it a lot more.
- D: It remind me quite a lot of nature sort of, it looked- it reminded me a lot of a flame or maybe water. Sort of the speed of it, like the flickering of a flame, a bit like that. And actually I found that quite pleasant to look at. I sort of got distracted a few times, I didn't find it alarming or anything.
- VS: Great. Some people have already linked it to their experience of meditation but do you think your experience of meditation had an impact on the experience you just had?
- A: For me it did, yeah.
- I: I think because , as I said before, I didn't see colour when I was in meditation, I'm pretty sure from now on when I'm going to do the meditation I'm going to be in the same stage, I don't know why but I feel I'm going to see colour. Because I was infused with so many colours , so many images, that I'm pretty sure if I do meditation now, I think if I close my eyes I'm going to see those colours. I don't know why but I'm feeling that.
- B: I'm not sure if it's specifically meditation that did it, but the fact that I watched it in a kind of calm environment , and after I knew I was already calm after meditation,... If I just got sent that link at work or something ...
- [Lots of laughter and giggles from the group]*
- B: I'd be like, what the hell is this and dismiss it right away but because I came at it from a calm perspective I took it in more.
- VS: The setting felt quite important?
- B: Yeah.
- H: Is that what you're asking? Are you asking if the meditation we did prior to watching it had an impact on how we watched it? Or meditation in general?
- VS: Either-
- H: Would have been represented within that?
- VS: Not represented but whether it impacted the experience you had?

- H: [throughout] Yeah, oh yeah of course (in agreement that it did)
- F: I think it clashed with me a little bit because I was very calm and peaceful and that really-
- [Laughter and giggles in the group]*
- F: Was something, and I could feel something similar to what you said, the frustration, and I found it a bit difficult.
- VS; [Jokingly] I'm sorry to have done that to you on a Sunday evening!
- F: No it wasn't a traumatic experience, it was just difficult for me.
- VS: Reflecting on what we've just done, do you think this focus group reflection has impacted your reflection on the art you've just seen? Do you think you would have thought about it in this sort of detail or had as much reflection on the art afterwards if we hadn't done this?
- G: Not as much as this, you'd have just got to what you thought of it and then moved on, I would have. But this, hearing everyone's views about it can change what you think as well.
- B: Yeah I think even if I saw it in an art gallery I'd be looking around for a little plaque to try and explain it. If I couldn't find one, I'd just move on and forget about it I think.
- [Laughter from the group]*

Post-session comment [which participant asked to be recorded]:

- J: Can I just add to that, what I didn't say is that I go on the train a lot to Brighton. Sometimes you get on the wrong side and you see – if you shut your eyes because of the sun, it's exactly like that, isn't it, it just sort of changes... [...] and the bits where it doesn't quite come into focus is quite annoying because you just want to see it.

## Appendix Seven:

### Ethics Review

#### FORM UPR16

##### Research Ethics Review Checklist

Please include this completed form as an appendix to your thesis (see the Research Degrees Operational Handbook for more information)



<b>Postgraduate Research Student (PGRS) Information</b>		<b>Student ID:</b>	422899
<b>PGRS Name:</b>	Victoria Smith		
<b>Department:</b>	School of Media and Performing Arts	<b>First Supervisor:</b>	Laurie Ede
<b>Start Date:</b> (or progression date for Prof Doc students)	September 2012		
<b>Study Mode and Route:</b>	Part-time <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Full-time <input type="checkbox"/>	MPhil <input type="checkbox"/> PhD <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	MD <input type="checkbox"/> Professional Doctorate <input type="checkbox"/>
<b>Title of Thesis:</b>	The hand-painted films of Stan Brakhage: An interdisciplinary and phenomenological exploration of painted moving images		
<b>Thesis Word Count:</b> (excluding ancillary data)			
<p>If you are unsure about any of the following, please contact the local representative on your Faculty Ethics Committee for advice. Please note that it is your responsibility to follow the University's Ethics Policy and any relevant University, academic or professional guidelines in the conduct of your study</p> <p>Although the Ethics Committee may have given your study a favourable opinion, the final responsibility for the ethical conduct of this work lies with the researcher(s).</p>			
<b>UKRIO Finished Research Checklist:</b> (If you would like to know more about the checklist, please see your Faculty or Departmental Ethics Committee rep or see the online version of the full checklist at: <a href="http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/">http://www.ukrio.org/what-we-do/code-of-practice-for-research/</a> )			
a) Have all of your research and findings been reported accurately, honestly and within a reasonable time frame?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>		
b) Have all contributions to knowledge been acknowledged?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>		
c) Have you complied with all agreements relating to intellectual property, publication and authorship?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>		
d) Has your research data been retained in a secure and accessible form and will it remain so for the required duration?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>		
e) Does your research comply with all legal, ethical, and contractual requirements?	YES <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> NO <input type="checkbox"/>		
<b>Candidate Statement:</b>			
I have considered the ethical dimensions of the above named research project, and have successfully obtained the necessary ethical approval(s)			
<b>Ethical review number(s) from Faculty Ethics Committee (or from NRES/SCREC):</b>	Vikki Smith		
If you have <i>not</i> submitted your work for ethical review, and/or you have answered 'No' to one or more of questions a) to e), please explain below why this is so:			
<b>Signed (PGRS):</b>			<b>Date:</b> 15 September 2018

UPR16 – April 2018



18<sup>th</sup> October 2017

**Faculty of the Creative and Cultural Industries Ethics Committee**

**FAVOURABLE ETHICAL OPINION with conditions**

**Study Title:** Painting on film: an interdisciplinary and performative exploration of Stan Brakage's hand-painted works.

**Reference Number:** Vikki Smith

**Date submitted:** September 15<sup>th</sup> 2017

**Version Number:** version 1

Thank you for resubmitting your application to the Faculty Ethics Committee.  
It is a very interesting and intriguing project.

CCI Ethics Committee was content to grant a favourable ethical opinion of the above research on the basis described in the submitted documents listed at Annex A, and subject to standard general conditions (See Annex B).

**Notes and conditions:**

1. Make sure that you participants do not have any medical conditions i.e. such as epilepsy, which may impact on their health.
2. Make sure that the Risk Assessment section of your application is transferred to the official University Risk Assessment form and is signed.
3. Please be mindful that applications should not be submitted with just the application review timescale prior to the research activity taking place, this is not sufficient time. A two to three month period before the designated research activity is the minimum any researcher should allow. This will cover any research project where the application receives either an unfavourable review or favourable review with conditions, where you will need more time to address any issues raised.
4. Please make sure that all documents used in this research have the current University logo on them and any invitation letters are on official letter headed paper.
5. Applications should be submitted in word format.

Please note that the favourable opinion of CCI Ethics Committee does not grant permission or approval to undertake the research. Management permission or approval must be obtained from any host organisation, including the University of Portsmouth or supervisor, prior to the start of the study.

Wishing you every success in your research

*Catherine Teeling*

Catherine Teeling

#### Annexes

A - Documents reviewed

B - After ethical review - Guidance for researchers

#### **ANNEX A**      **Documents reviewed**

The documents ethically reviewed for this application

Document	Version	Date
ETHICS FORM	V1	September 15th
Participant Information Sheet(s) (list if necessary)	V1	September 15th
Consent Form(s) (list if necessary)	V1	September 15th
N/A (verbal request at Sangha sessions)	N/A (verbal request at Sangha sessions)	August 2017
Risk Assessment Form	V1	September 15th
Advertisement	V1	September 15th
External evidence for organisation showing support	V1	September 15th
Questionnaire	V1	September 15th
Risk Assessment Form	V1	September 15th

#### **ANNEX B - After ethical review - Guidance for researchers**

1. This Annex sets out important guidance for researchers with a favourable opinion from a University of Portsmouth Ethics Committee. Please read the guidance carefully. A failure to follow the guidance could lead to the committee reviewing and possibly revoking its opinion on the research.
2. It is assumed that the research will commence within 1 year of the date of the favourable ethical opinion or the start date stated in the application, whichever is the latest.
3. The research must not commence until the researcher has obtained any necessary management permissions or approvals – this is particularly pertinent in cases of research hosted by external organisations. The appropriate head of department should be aware of a member of staff's research plans.

4. If it is proposed to extend the duration of the study beyond that stated in the application, the Ethics Committee must be informed.

5. Any proposed substantial amendments must be submitted to the Ethics Committee for review. A substantial amendment is any amendment to the terms of the application for ethical review, or to the protocol or other supporting documentation approved by the Committee that is likely to affect to a significant degree:

- (a) the safety or physical or mental integrity of participants
- (b) the scientific value of the study
- (c) the conduct or management of the study.

5.1 A substantial amendment should not be implemented until a favourable ethical opinion has been given by the Committee.

6. At the end of the research a final report should be submitted to the ethics committee. A template for this can be found on the University Ethics webpage.

7. Researchers are reminded of the University's commitments as stated in the [Concordat to Support Research Integrity](#) viz:

- maintaining the highest standards of rigour and integrity in all aspects of research
- ensuring that research is conducted according to appropriate ethical, legal and professional frameworks, obligations and standards
- supporting a research environment that is underpinned by a culture of integrity and based on good governance, best practice and support for the development of researchers
- using transparent, robust and fair processes to deal with allegations of research misconduct should they arise
- working together to strengthen the integrity of research and to reviewing progress regularly and openly.

8. In ensuring that it meets these commitments the University has adopted the [UKRIO Code of Practice for Research](#). Any breach of this code may be considered as misconduct and may be investigated following the University [Procedure for the Investigation of Allegations of Misconduct in Research](#). Researchers are advised to use the [UKRIO checklist](#) as a simple guide to integrity.